

**The Secret Lives of Slaves: Berbice, 1819 to 1827**

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements  
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in History  
in the University of Canterbury 2002

by

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1140  
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2002

## **Abstract**

This thesis examines slavery in Berbice in the decades prior to emancipation in 1834 utilising a unique cache of slave testimony recorded during the period. The testimonies and evidence from the slaves of Berbice reveal a situation very different from that portrayed in the wider historiography of slavery. While the slaves of Berbice could easily escape and live as 'bush negroes', the overwhelming majority chose to stay. In part, this was because they were able to negotiate a wide range of customary work and social practices which ameliorated the conditions of slavery. In part, it was because they were able to trade the exploitation of their labour for the ability to form cohesive and enduring communities which incorporated complex familial and kinship networks and which enabled them to establish identities, values and status which transcended their legal position as slaves. And in part, it was because while physical coercion in Berbice was often cruel and inhumane by modern standards, the most severe punishments were seldom imposed upon a majority of slaves and were less severe than the treatment routinely inflicted upon some sections of the British population. Slavery needs to be contextualised in time and place to understand the impact it had on slaves. By using a detailed study of the slave testimony, supported by the evidence from a statistical analysis of the information recorded in the documents, this thesis has sought to distinguish the typical from the untypical and in so doing recover the lives of the society's inhabitants.

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# **List of Abbreviations:**

- CB1      CO 116/138, Further Papers Relating to Slaves in the West Indies; Berbice. Investigations. And, Investigation of Sundry Complaints of Negroes.
  
- CB2      CO 116/140, Berbice Complaints of Slaves Made to the Fiscal. In 5 Sections covering the period 8th January 1824 to 28th December 1825.
  
- CB3      CO 116/143, "Berbice. Complaints of Slaves made to the Protectors Office, Berbice, 2nd November 1826 to 31st August 1827."
  
- CD2      CO 116/156, Copies of Reports from Protector of Slaves, 1 Nov 1829 to 30 April 1830.
  
- CJ1      CO 116/140 Court of Criminal Justice Berbice
  
- CJ2      CO 116/139 Court of Criminal Justice Berbice
  
- JPR      John Pool, Rector, Westmoreland Jamaica 1755, Register of the Parish of Westmoreland, from the Bright family records, University of Melbourne Microfilm 97/026
  
- PB1      CO 116/143, Punishment Records from 1st November 1826 to 7th January 1827, and January to June 1827.
  
- PD1      CO 116/153, Protector of Slaves Reports. Part 1 Demerara.
  
- PP23      PP HC XXIII 1828 "Second Report of the Commissioners of Enquiry into the Administration of Criminal and Civil Justice In the West Indies and South American Colonies: United Colony of Demerara and Essequibo, and Colony of Berbice. 14 April 1828."
  
- THD      Thomas Thistlewood's Diary in 37 volumes in Monson MSS, Lincoln County Record Office, England. Monson 31/1-37.

## Chapter 1: Berbice and the Fiscal

### Preamble

The light breezes off the coast of Berbice, though strong enough to keep the early nineteenth century colony schooners moving slowly forward, rarely proved sufficient to prevent the boats from rolling badly on the long, brown, Atlantic swells, and the short piece of sea which separated the Demerara and Berbice rivers was frequently traversed in an agony of relentless motion.<sup>1</sup> Mercifully, the trip from Georgetown to New Amsterdam was usually brief, no more than a couple of uncomfortable days separated by an even more uncomfortable night. Though the region knew neither hurricane nor gale, the boats would often lurch violently as they crossed the tidal rips which surrounded each of the many small rivers and waterways that fractured Guiana's shoreline.<sup>2</sup> Any passengers on board would clutch the lee rail for support while they eagerly scanned the green, courida fringed coast in the hope of picking out the smooth dark signature of an empoldered sea wall, evidence of working

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<sup>1</sup> 'Colony Schooners' were those which provided transportation along the Guiana Coast. The brown sea waters resulted from the muddy effluence of the many rivers which drained the area of land between the Orinoco and Amazon rivers, and extended some 50 miles out to sea. Sir Walter Raleigh reported that the water between Guiana and Trinidad was sweet enough to drink. The word Guiana derives from the Amerindian word "Ghina" meaning water (James Rodway, *History of British Guiana, from the year 1668 to the Present Time*, Vols. 1 & 2, Georgetown 1891, v1, p. 26).

<sup>2</sup> Guiana lies in the convergence zone, an area typically free of strong winds and outside of the Caribbean hurricane belt.

estates and approaching habitation.<sup>3</sup> Even then it would be another four hours before the schooner made its way up the Berbice river and on into its largest tributary, the Canje, where the ship would finally drop anchor. And there, ranged along the southern bank of the Canje, lay the town of New Amsterdam, capital of the colony of Berbice.<sup>4</sup> Soon after anchoring, lighters would emerge from the confusion of activities on the river bank, collecting passengers and cargo from the schooner. The sea voyage left the passengers grateful for the solid greenheart planking on the main stelling,<sup>5</sup> and though relieved by the feel of earth beneath their feet, they had yet to make their way through a melee of porters, stevedores, sailors, and boat builders, all clustered on the lower banks of the river.<sup>6</sup>

One such voyage in January of 1819 carried the honourable Henry Beard Esquire to his new appointment as President of the Courts of Civil and Criminal Justice in New Amsterdam,<sup>7</sup> a post he would hold for the next two years.<sup>8</sup> As a high

<sup>3</sup> Empoldering involved the building of dams and sea walls along with canals and drainage locks called 'kokers' which prevented the incursion of salty tide water from the sea at high tide and allowed the fresh water run off to drain out at low tide. The empoldering of much of the colony was done by the Dutch when they administered the colony. The courida is a long rooted plant which grows along the low coastal regions, giving way to mangroves along the tidal rivers (James Rodway, *Guiana: British, Dutch, and French*, London 1912, Chapter 1.)

<sup>4</sup> New Amsterdam had replaced Zeelandia (situated some 50 miles up the river) as capital in the eighteenth century so as to be able to moor larger vessels for direct trade with Europe, (Henry Bollingbroke, *A voyage to Demerary, 1799 to 1806*, Reprinted from the London edition 1807, Georgetown 1947, p.111).

<sup>5</sup> Greenheart is a very strong and durable timber found in Guiana, used extensively for maritime structures. 'Stelling' was a term used in Guiana for a landing for boats or punts on the rivers or canals.

<sup>6</sup> Bollingbroke noted the "splendid" brick buildings which housed the governor, fiscal, receiver and secretary of the colony, but lamented that the "eye and taste are both insulted on looking at this fine pile of buildings from the river; at the water's edge, in a line directly opposite the house, and not twenty yards from it, is a boat builder's yard; so that his Excellency and family ... are obliged to wade through a group of negroes at work, a heap of chips, boiling pitch pots, and many other delicate etceteras". (Bollingbroke, *A voyage to Demerary* p.112).

<sup>7</sup> Henry Beard was appointed to the position of President of the Courts of Civil and Criminal Justice and took up his post in January 1819.

<sup>8</sup> Beard was to become Lieutenant Governor of the colony on the death in November 1820 of the popular H. W. Bentinck, who had died after becoming near bankrupt as a result of the 'cotton crash'.

ranking official, Beard would have presented himself to Governor H. W. Bentinck, before meeting the Fiscal, H. S. Bennett. As President of the Courts of Civil and Criminal Justice, Beard would have had to work closely with the Fiscal, an official with a position unique to the colonies of Berbice, Demerara and Essequibo. Beard may well have been warned about the powers of the Fiscals by Governor Bentinck, who had good reason to treat them with caution. While Bentinck had been Governor of Demerara he had entered into a dispute with the Fiscal of that colony, Van Berchel, and as a result had lost his governorship.<sup>9</sup> It is perhaps surprising then that Beard, a young and inexperienced lawyer, requested that Bennett, a seasoned official who had already been over five years in Berbice, should record the Fiscal's Office's handling of complaints made by slaves and others seeking redress. The Fiscal acted as arbiter, prosecutor, defender, judge and jury on most of the cases brought before him by complainants, whether slave or free. The more serious cases were prosecuted before the Courts of Civil and Criminal Justice, but the vast majority were summarily handled by the Fiscal alone.<sup>10</sup> Bennett agreed, though it would seem from later correspondence that he had been annoyed at the young president's intrusion into the operation of his office.<sup>11</sup> Following local custom, the two men would have then removed themselves to the relative cool of the gallery to smoke their 'segars' and

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<sup>9</sup> Henry G. Dalton, *The history of British Guiana*, London 1855, p.300.

<sup>10</sup> See later in this chapter for more details of the Fiscal.

<sup>11</sup> Beard and Bennett later disagreed about Beard's request that Bennett should record the complaints of slaves. When Beard later requested to see these records, himself responding to a request from London, Bennett disingenuously replied that he had interpreted Beard's request in 1819 to record the complaints to have been a "matter of self satisfaction". Beard's letter suggests that his 1819 request had been more formal, (CB1, Letter, Beard to Bathurst, 19 Feb 1825, Letter from Bennett to Beard, 19 Feb 1825).

drink their 'sangaree'.<sup>12</sup> This was traditionally a time of relaxed conviviality, but given the impertinence of Beard's request and his rather formal and businesslike manner, it is likely not to have been as cordial or relaxed as it would otherwise have been. Indeed it may well have anticipated Beard's later unpopularity within the colony.<sup>13</sup>

It was not long before the Fiscal had the opportunity to put his undertaking to Beard into effect. On the first of February 1819 a group of nine men assembled at his office. The men were woodcutters, accustomed to the bush and working in small groups away from settled areas, but nevertheless, with La Rose in the lead, they stepped into the Fiscal's office and began their complaint. With Bennett's clerk taking notes, La Rose first complained of not receiving his customary allowances. The Fiscal eyed La Rose and asked "how he came in the good state he appears in", to which La Rose replied that they were "generally supplied by the Indians". La Rose's testimony continued, and the clerk recorded it as he had been ordered. He would also record the testimonies of Klaas, Conraad, Kees, Lubin, Tom, Sam, William and Adam. Later still, the slave's owner, Mrs. Saunders, and her overseer Christian Mackreel, gave their testimony. After considering the evidence the Fiscal decided to prosecute the case before the Court of Criminal Justice, an action that was favourable for the slave complainants, with substantial fines levied against Mrs. Saunders.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Sangaree was a mixture of brandy and water and was considered obligatory for European men to indulge after any meeting. See Bollingbroke, *A voyage to Demerary* and Dalton, *The history of British Guiana*.

<sup>13</sup> On becoming governor, Beard, though thorough, was "not altogether liked" in the colony (Rodway, *Guiana: British, Dutch, and French*, p.276).

<sup>14</sup> CO 116/138, "Further Papers Relating to Slaves in the West Indies; Berbice. Investigation of Sundry Complaints of Negroes", complaint dated 1 February 1819, (Hereafter: CB1, 1 February 1829).

The case was not new. Such complaints had been always brought by slaves to the Fiscal for redress in Berbice, but this was the first to have been recorded, and thus began a body of documentary records as unusual in the Americas as the Fiscal himself. The meeting between Beard and Bennett, and the idea of recording the Fiscal's dealings with slaves, were not events that would change the course of human history, or alter the direction of the British empire, or even greatly influence the emancipation of slaves. La Rose was no Fredrick Douglas, and Bennett was no Abraham Lincoln. What follows from the records these people helped to generate is not a history of the makers or shakers, but a story of the made and the shaken - the history of a society that comes to life in the first decade of the twenty first century through the auspices of that one simple request by Henry Beard. In that moment a voice was given to the vast majority of the inhabitants of Berbice, life given to the names on inventories, and substance invested into their society. This thesis will not just be a study of how those designated as slaves fitted into an emerging Eurocentric world economic and socio-political global hegemony, but how this European world fitted into the slaves' own fledgling New World society.

## **Introduction**

Berbice was but one of many slave societies in the New World in the early nineteenth century, and for the most part, this thesis will confine itself to that colony and to the period covered by the documents which were generated as a result of Mr. Beard's request to Mr. Bennett; i.e. the nine years from 1819 to 1827. No two slave owning colonies or states in the New World could be considered identical, and each



will have features which could affect the structure of their particular society. The very fact that Berbice, along with Demerara and Essequibo, had Fiscals who would hear and act upon the grievances of the slaves would certainly have influenced how slavery was negotiated and practiced in those colonies. Nevertheless, some features of the social and working lives of slaves that have emerged from this study of Berbice could give some pause for thought about some universal notions of slavery which have developed within the historiography.

Slavery remains a contentious and problematic issue for the descendents of slaves in the modern Americas. Even after a century or more of historical discourse, the wound of New World slavery refuses to heal, and clings to the Pan American consciousness like an old scab that will not come off without bleeding. Hardly a week goes by before some newspaper in the West Indies makes reference to a slave system which had ended more than 170 years ago. In the United States, new demands for compensation for the descendents of slaves prolong and complicate the debate. Randall Robinson's recent book *The Debt: What America Owes to Blacks* is but one of several calling for reparations to the descendants of slaves.<sup>15</sup> In his book Robinson describes a visit to the Capitol building in Washington where he finds just one black represented among the heroes of America's past. The small bust of Martin Luther King, his head looking downward, is overwhelmed by the large statue of Thomas Jefferson, whose head, by contrast, is held confidently high.<sup>16</sup> The image graphically illustrates the paradox of slavery in the Americas: no matter how much infamy is attached to those who owned slaves, it will always be insufficient to

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<sup>15</sup> Those who oppose reparations also have their supporters such as, David Horowitz, *Uncivil wars: the controversy over reparations for slavery*, New York 2001.

<sup>16</sup> Randall N. Robinson, *The debt: what America owes to blacks*, New York 2001.

expunge the deep sense of dishonour for those who were slaves. While Jefferson looks heroically out onto a bright future, King stares pensively down on an unsatisfactory and unresolved past – a past which can still influence the psyche of people separated from slavery by many generations. Even more recently Harry Belafonte's comparisons of the US Secretary of State Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice to privileged slaves "permitted to come into the house of the master"<sup>17</sup> suggests that the legacy of slavery remains one of the defining characteristic of black consciousness in the Americas.

Since the Second World War historians have attempted to salvage some measure of dignity for those who had been slaves in the Americas. The attempts to rescue slaves from abject powerlessness have evolved over time. Melville Herskovits proposed that behaviour previously understood within a racist ideology of African stupidity and laziness was in fact active resistance to the institution of slavery. According to this thesis, slaves developed an almost co-ordinated culture of slave deception and cunning aimed at thwarting the efforts of white masters to exploit their labour.<sup>18</sup> The argument, however, is weakened by the weight of all the profits white slaveholders were able to amass despite such resistance, and the fact that slave based agriculture was at least as efficient as non-slave based agriculture.<sup>19</sup> The problem has been recognised by some historians. David Brion Davis, for example, notes the paradox of slave resistance and asks the question:

How could workers who were relatively free from market forces produce so much or drive such economic growth, especially when

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<sup>17</sup> Associated Press, The Press, Christchurch 26 October 2002, p. B4.

<sup>18</sup> Melville J. Herskovits, *The myth of the negro past*, Boston 1958.

<sup>19</sup> Robert William Fogel, *Without consent or contract: the rise and fall of American slavery*, New York 1989.

historians claim they were engaged in subtle forms of day-to-day resistance? I have seen no satisfactory answers to such questions, but suspect that the negotiating and bargaining between slaves and masters often led to compromises that actually aided productivity.<sup>20</sup>

In the next chapter we will see how those productivity compromises were arrived at in Berbice, but economic logic demands that slavery in places such as Berbice would never have been sustained had it not been highly profitable.

Eugene D. Genovese in his book, *Roll Jordan Roll*, has adopted a more balanced approach to slave empowerment. Yet while Genovese's example of Landon Carter may have demonstrated how a powerful slave owner could have been frustrated in his efforts of exacting total control over the working lives of his slaves, Carter nonetheless did not suffer unduly as a consequence.<sup>21</sup> Genovese emphasises the unwritten negotiations slaves conducted, presumably over generations, which afforded them some measure of self-respect. His conclusions, however, are somehow unsatisfying because, though he praises the slaves and reviles the slave owning class (and slavery in general), he finds that slaves survived by means of a one way accommodation which left slaves dependent on their white masters. In the context of such an outrageously evil institution, the small efforts of amelioration by the slaves cannot help but seem trifling.

Very recent histories have certainly smoothed the rough edges of such explanations or have concentrated on the internal world of slave culture and have thus avoided the question of how slaves made their decisions in relation to their interaction with white authority. Nevertheless, as the ongoing dissatisfaction of modern African Americans attest, the legacy of much of the historiography has not

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<sup>20</sup> David Brion Davis, "Looking at slavery from broader perspectives", *American Historical Review*, v105(2), April 2000, p.465.

<sup>21</sup> Eugene D Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, roll: the world the slaves made*, New York 1976, p.295.

resulted in a satisfactory resolution. One persistent difficulty revolves around the paradox entwined within an examination of slavery based on a premise of moral outrage. By first placing the institution of slavery in the Americas on a pedestal of infamy, it becomes almost impossible to attribute to slaves any control over their society or any dignity in their lives. Slavery was not a benign institution, but we must look at it within the context of the period and coolly understand not just its horrors, but its limitations. Slavery cannot be understood from a position of moral outrage, it can only be reviled.

There is no justification for the historian to axiomatically demonise the conditions of slavery, relative to the conditions of ordinary life at the time, any more than the evidence indicates. In this study of Berbice I have attempted to understand slavery as it may have been understood by both slaves and masters at the time. That slavery in Berbice was able to generate evil and despotic masters capable of outrageous acts of cruelty on those over whom they had power is undeniable. Almost any society is capable of producing such psychopaths. But these characters were rare in Berbice during the period of this study. As will be shown, most slaves in the colony would not have encountered such individuals. Slaves too could be exceptional, and these characters frequently emerge from the complaints made by slaves. However, though much of the evidence is based on the testimony of complaining slaves, the social milieu of the complainant is often simultaneously revealed. This makes it possible to understand both the individual characters as well as their social context. As it is the behaviour of the slave majority that determined how slaves responded as a group to slavery, the aim of this thesis will be to concentrate as much on the commonplace as on the exceptional.

While most historians avoid the vitriolic hyperbole that characterised the abolitionist movement, they have nonetheless perpetuated an impression of slavery that transcends the conditions under which most slaves of Berbice lived and worked. Furthermore, it was not slavery *per se* which the slaves objected to most, it was their lack of freedoms within their society, regardless of their official status. So free coloured and African indentured servants could be just as dissatisfied as slaves. This became abundantly clear immediately following emancipation. In 1834 all slaves over six years of age became indentured labourers, while those under six years were free of all obligations. The new system had abolished slavery, but not forced labour, and thus the former slaves protested even more strenuously than they had under slavery.<sup>22</sup>

Dwight McBride, in his recent work on slave testimony *Impossible Witnesses*, speaks of a “discursive terrain” within which slave testimony and the rhetoric of the abolitionist must be understood.<sup>23</sup> Though such a discourse was justifiable in the attempt to bring an end to slavery, this does not license modern historians to perpetuate all its claims and assumptions. Most slaves had to accept physical constraint, and the slaves of Berbice were no exception. Central to understanding the dynamics of any slave system is the relationship between the slave and the slave’s owners or the owner’s representatives. This differed between various slave societies, but historians commonly agree on some very general notions of slavery. Orlando Patterson has been particularly absorbed by the socio-psychological aspects of

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<sup>22</sup> The problems of the indenture system were highlighted by the fact that it was abolished some two years before it was officially set to conclude and indentured labourers were freed in Berbice on 1 August 1838. For accounts of the indentured system and its failure see; Rodway, *History of British Guiana*, V3, Chapter 27; Dalton, *History of British Guiana*, Chapter 12.

<sup>23</sup> Dwight A McBride, *Impossible Witnesses: Truth, Abolitionism, and Slave Testimony*, New York 2001, p.3.

slavery and the slave-master relationship. The power relationships within a slave system are, according to Patterson, based on general notions of power relationships between actors in any society, but differ in both the kind and extremity of such relationships. Patterson's work is difficult to deal with because there are grains of truth in much of what he says, largely because of the very general nature of those truths. Dominance of one individual over another is almost universal to various degrees in all human relations so that almost any behaviour can be interpreted within the context of dominance, which leaves only the manifestation and degree to be haggled over. Patterson argues that the institution of slavery corrals the majority of individuals into a model created by the external forces of the institution. This is certainly so, but then all humans are victims of such behavioural modification by their position in society, and the behaviour expected of that position. Such modification is one of the ways individuals cooperate in order to form anything like a society. Patterson provides a definition of slavery which avoids what David Brion Davis calls the "superficial variables" and focuses on slavery's "essential elements".<sup>24</sup> Patterson's definition of slavery as being "*the permanent, violent domination of natively alienated and generally dishonored persons*"<sup>25</sup> will be discussed again in Chapter Nine, but at this point it should be said that the definition is difficult to apply to the slaves of Berbice in the early nineteenth century. Moreover, those "superficial variables" may be the only features which can be discussed when assessing the impact of any slave system.

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<sup>24</sup> David Brion Davis, *Slavery and human progress*, New York 1984, p.10.

<sup>25</sup> Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and social death: a comparative study*, Cambridge Mass. 1982, p. 13. (Patterson's italics).

Slaves are routinely presented in contemporary historiography as victims of their lives, rather than as masters over them. What historian of slavery has not thought about the description of the stereotypical American slave forwarded by Stanley Elkins in *Slavery: A problem in American institutional and intellectual life* which characterises the typical plantation slave as “docile but irresponsible, loyal but lazy, humble but chronically given to lying and stealing” his behaviour “full of infantile silliness and his talk inflated with childish exaggeration”, and his relationship with his owner characterised by “utter dependence and childlike attachment”.<sup>26</sup> Of course this appraisal is very much that of the delusional master, or more likely one informed by the Aristotle’s ideas of the natural slave, rather than by any real slave. Compliance with slavery does not equate to acceptance, and the interpretation by whites of black consciousness does not equate to black interpretations of their consciousness. Slaves in Berbice were certainly exploited and devalued by white society, but it does not logically follow that slaves therefore accepted that evaluation of their position.

Decades of characterising the institution of slavery by its extremities have left slaves with little opportunity for dignity. The more evil slavery is made to seem and the more extreme the domination by masters is made to appear, the more difficult it is to explain why slaves put up with it. A distorted view of slavery renders slave compliance not only implausible but offensively patronising. It must be emphasised that there is no defence of slavery in Berbice or elsewhere, but it needs to be realistically presented to appreciate its impact on the lives of slaves. Exaggeration

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<sup>26</sup> Stanley M. Elkins, *Slavery: A problem in American institutional and intellectual life*, Chicago 1959, p. 82.

not only undermines efforts to understand the slave's history, but excuses an object far more worthy of historical opprobrium: racism. The evolution of slavery in the New World coincided with the evolution of racism, and it could be argued that without the European construction of the racial suitability of Africans to subjugation and control, slavery could never have endured for so long the assault of eighteenth and nineteenth century European liberalism.<sup>27</sup>

That individuals, corporations, and financial institutions were able to exploit enslavement is unremarkable. The exploitation of vulnerable populations for the profit of a select and powerful few has always existed in various guises, and will typically push socially permissible excess to the limit in order to maximise gain. Greed is capable of justifying many ethically questionable practices. Once slavery had gained a foothold in the Americas, and with a large and sufficiently alien pool of labour available from Africa, it is not difficult to understand how the system was able to thrive even during a period when Enlightenment sensibilities of universal human freedom were beginning to take root in the collective European consciousness. Explaining how slave owners and European society in the nineteenth century were able to sustain and justify their oppression of a large group of African descended New World immigrants is no more difficult than explaining how those of our own Western society are able to 'write' the wrongs of the past on computers assembled by the modern 'slaves' of South East Asia, or jog around the lush green fields of Western university campuses on sneakers stitched by children in the sweat shops of

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<sup>27</sup> The question of whether racism preceded and fostered slavery forms the basis of what has become known as the 'origins debate', which began with an initial offering from Susie Ames and Wesley Craven, when the issues became topical in their own right. However, the debate really heated up following the article by Oscar and Mary Handlin, "Origins of the Southern Labor System" in 1950. The issue still occupies a place in the history of slavery with no clear resolution.



Pakistan. In one sense, slavery was an honest and open system of labour exploitation, and the global capitalists of the day could not hide behind the barriers of sub contractors or a rhetoric of development and international trade.<sup>28</sup>

That slavery was wrong, even for the day, is undeniable. It was inconsistent with the main stream of ideological progress in Europe at the time, and the anti-slavery movement had been providing a growing body of evidence that placed slavery outside an evolving civilised world.<sup>29</sup> That the most powerful and prosperous nations were the main proponents of this backward institution was nothing less than reprehensible. But slavery as it emerges in Berbice was not the overwhelming instrument of subjugation portrayed in abolitionist propaganda and much subsequent historiography. The evidence from Berbice indicates that those designated as slaves did not consider themselves overwhelmingly dishonoured. While they understood that their position as slaves in the wider society was lower than that of free persons, they did not accord themselves the lowly status attributed to them by their masters or later observers. Most slaves in Berbice may have accepted the negotiated conditions of slavery as practised in most workplaces, but that did not mean that they accepted the idealised white European model of slavery, with its attendant notions of inferiority, racial suitability, dependency and paternalism. The growing influence of racial stereotyping, and the barriers of race which confronted those of African descent eager to advance their position in society, would prove to be a far greater impediment to their future place and prosperity than any background of enslavement.

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<sup>28</sup> A sound exposé of modern labour exploitation practices can be found in Naomi Klein's *No logo*, London 2000.

<sup>29</sup> As mentioned previously, abolitionists were certainly not above exaggeration to promote their cause, as Robert Fogel points out (Fogel, *Without consent or contract*, pp.406-411).

## Berbice

Before the coming of the Europeans, the region of Guiana was populated with Caribs, Arawaks and Warrows. While these tribes were able to keep the French out of Cayenne for some time, they were not effective in preventing the first settlement in Berbice by the Dutch in 1627 under a charter issued by the Dutch West India Company. The colony suffered and prospered alternatively within the vicissitudes of European power brokerage, the instability of the produce markets in Europe, variable colonial administrative expertise, numerous diseases and the odd slave rebellion until the end of the eighteenth century. In 1796 the colony surrendered to the British during the French revolutionary wars, but was restored to the Dutch after the peace of Amiens in 1802. The British recaptured the colony in 1803 after which it remained in British hands until independence in 1966 as part of modern day Guyana. The primary significance for this thesis of the 1803 capitulation by the Dutch was that it was relatively peaceful, with little disturbance of the inhabitants, and that, under the terms of capitulation, the laws, customs and usages of the Dutch colonial administration were to be retained by the British. In this way the anomalous situation of a British colony with a largely Dutch based judicial system was created, with many officials, plantation owners, and employed workers being Dutch. After the British takeover, money poured into the colony which simultaneously increased both the agricultural production and the number of slaves until the slave trade was terminated in 1808.<sup>30</sup> With low natural increase, slave numbers declined from that

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<sup>30</sup> See Rodway, *History of British Guiana*; Dalton, *The history of British Guiana*; and M. Shahabuddeen, *The legal system of Guyana*, Georgetown Guyana 1973.

time on, as did agricultural output, at least until the next wave of immigrants came to the colony from India.

*Demographics, 1819 to 1829.*

TABLE 1.1:  
POPULATION, BERBICE 1819 AND 1829.<sup>31</sup>

	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>1819</i>			
Slaves	13,328	10,492	23,820
Whites	N/A	N/A	N/A
Freedmen	N/A	N/A	N/A
<i>1829</i>			
Slaves	11,304	9,496	20,800
Whites	431	139	570
Freedmen	681	980	1,661
Total Non Whites	11,985	10,476	22,461
<i>1819 - 1822 (3 years)</i>			
Estimated Slave Births	1,039	1,036	2,075
Estimated Slave Deaths	1,480	1,169	2,649
<i>1822 - 1825 (3 years)</i>			
Estimated Slave Births	964	923	1,887
Estimated Slave Deaths	1,597	1,246	2,843
<i>1825 - 1828 (3 years)</i>			
Estimated Slave Births	1,146	1,083	2,229
Estimated Slave Deaths	1,219	838	2,057
<i>1828 - 1831 (3 years)</i>			
Estimated Slave Births	1,023	960	1,983
Estimated Slave Deaths	1,294	942	2,236

<sup>31</sup> Compiled from B. W Higman, *Slave populations of the British Caribbean 1807-1834*, Baltimore 1984, Tables S1.1, S1.2, S1.14, S2.1. Note figures for 1829 also from 1830. Births and Deaths from Higman, Table S8.2.

TABLE 1.2:  
AGE DISTRIBUTION AMONG AFRICAN BORN AND CREOLE SLAVES 1819.<sup>32</sup>

<i>Ages</i>	<i>African Born Slaves</i>			<i>Creole Slaves</i>		
	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Total</i>
0 to 4	0	0	0	1290	1350	2640
5 to 9	0	0	0	1082	1204	2286
10 to 14	2	6	8	990	946	1936
15 to 19	55	28	83	638	602	1240
20 to 24	409	283	692	282	352	634
25 to 29	1534	1081	2615	282	343	625
30 to 34	1656	1096	2752	228	223	451
35 to 39	2008	1136	3144	194	202	396
40 to 44	1075	539	1614	118	128	246
45 to 49	648	283	931	102	81	183
50 to 54	257	153	410	35	58	93
55 to 59	133	94	227	30	39	69
60+ & Unknown	217	173	390	63	92	155
Total	7994	4872	12866	5334	5620	10954

TABLE 1.3:  
LIKELIHOOD OF BIRTHPLACE BY AGE, BERBICE 1819 & 1829.<sup>33</sup>

<i>Birthplace</i>	<i>Slaves Aged over 15 years</i>			
	<i>1819</i>		<i>1829</i>	
	<i>Number</i>	<i>Likelihood</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Likelihood</i>
Creole Slaves (Born in Berbice)	4092	24%	5873	32%
African Born Slaves	12858	76%	12476	68%

The general population figures for the period reveal two things. First, they show that the overwhelming majority of the residents of Berbice were slaves, with only a very small number of whites resident in the colony by 1829. Moreover that number declined over time. Second, they indicate that the slave population was also in

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, Table S4.1.

<sup>33</sup> The data in this table have been assembled by extrapolating the 1819 age distribution figures found in Table 1.2. It has been assumed a) that few slave imports occurred during the period, b) that most 5 to 15 year olds would live through to 1829, and c) that most slaves over 60 in 1819 would die by 1829. The data have been organised in this way to provide a simple estimation of the likelihood a plaintiff, whose birthplace cannot be identified in any other way, was either African born or Creole.

decline, although the rate of decline, as measured by the surplus of slave deaths over slave births, was improving over time. The tables also inform us about the population mix and the birthplace of the inhabitants. Information was rarely provided that would reveal the birthplace of slaves who brought complaints. However it would be useful to be able to do an estimate based on age. From the documents, the vast majority of slaves making a complaint were clearly over the age of 15, and in most cases over 19. In the few cases where a child was involved in a complaint, the child was accompanied by an adult in the action. Thus, if we accept that African born slaves were as likely as creoles to bring a complaint, then we can estimate the number of plaintiffs who were either creole or African born.<sup>34</sup> As can be seen from Table 1.3, in 1819 the majority of slaves over 15 were African born, some 12,858 in number, while just 4,009 were creole, that is born in Berbice. Thus African born adults represented over 76 percent of the adult slave population. Creoles, on the other hand, constituted the majority of those under 15 years of age, and those in this age group numbered 6,762 out of total creole population of 10,954, or nearly 62 percent of the total. Ten years later, in 1829, the demographics would not have altered dramatically and extrapolated figures are provided for that year.

Such a distribution had a considerable impact on the culture and behaviour of the inhabitants of Berbice, both slave and free. For example, one significant conclusion that can be drawn from these figures in relation to the complaint record is the remarkably rapid adoption of Western legal traditions by the Africans in Berbice. Though the population distribution between African and locally born slaves has

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<sup>34</sup> Of those complaints which can determine the birthplace of the complainant, the ratio of African to Creole complainants seems to reflect the general population ratio between these two groups of slaves.

implications for many other aspects of life in Berbice, the importance of cultural initiation and acclimatisation provided to new immigrants by the established creoles cannot be overlooked. Ira Berlin maintains that such vanguard individuals had a significance greater than their number would suggest and “began the process of integrating the icons and beliefs of the Atlantic world into a new way of life”.<sup>35</sup>

### *Geography*

Berbice is part of the general area known as the Guianas. This region lies on the North Eastern tip of South America and occupies the alluvial region between the deltas of the Orinoco and Amazon rivers. British Guiana is itself fractured with numerous waterways, but contains four major rivers, the Essequibo, the Demerara, the Berbice and the Corantyne, this latter forming the border between Berbice and Dutch Guiana (or present day Surinam). Such is the combined output of all these rivers that the water off the coast is brown and hardly more than brackish. The most significant aspect of Guiana is that its coastline is generally below sea level at high tide, and as this area accounts for the vast majority of the habitation, it requires walls to keep out the sea water at high tide, and a series of canals and locks called ‘kokers’ to let out the fresh water at low tide. This low lying alluvial plain was very fertile and there was generally little need to rotate crops or ‘rest’ the land, in sharp contrast to the situation in most other plantation economies in the New World. Behind this coastal fringe the densely forested land rises steadily to a plateau which extends into the Amazon basin. Then, as now, this inland region was largely unpopulated.

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<sup>35</sup> Ira Berlin, *Many thousands gone: the first two centuries of slavery in North America*, Cambridge Mass. 1998, p.17.

## *Plantations*

Most plantations bordering the sea or the lower reaches of the rivers had to have a sea wall to prevent flooding. To help defray the costs of maintaining those sea and river defences, the plantations were generally very long and thin, keeping each plantation's share of the sea wall small. Plantations were typically separated from one another by canals, thus movement between plantations or from any plantation to town often necessitated the use of boats, the smallest and commonest being called 'coriaals'. During the period of study there were about 140 plantations in Berbice.<sup>36</sup> Of those for which the crop type is known, about half were coffee plantations, about a quarter were given to sugar and a quarter devoted to cotton, although due to the higher number of slaves on sugar plantations about a third of the slaves worked on this type of plantation. The majority of plantation slaves, and most plantations, were owned by absentee landlords in Europe, with Britain, the Netherlands and Austria accounting for most.<sup>37</sup> Further research is required to fully unravel the ownership structures of all the plantations. Where a plantation was covered in a complaint action, and no mention is made of the proprietor it would be safe to assume that the owners lived overseas. In many cases the ownership was specifically noted as being offshore. While the period studied in this thesis covers the final decades of slavery, it also seems to presage some characteristics of remote and discreet ownership of profitable but perhaps ethically dubious offshore businesses by European capital in later eras. This kind of relationship affected the nature and priorities of industrial

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<sup>36</sup> Over time plantations came and went, some were combined some closed down some new ones opened, so the exact figure is difficult to ascertain. From the plantation punishment book returns of 1826 and 1827 there were 142 workplaces, though some of these were task gangs.

<sup>37</sup> See Table 7.6 in Chapter Seven.

plantation agriculture and the treatment of labour in the broader sense, and perhaps anticipated the modern phenomenon of financial institutions with ethically undifferentiated shareholdings in numerous questionable enterprises.

## The Documents

Historians work from sources and those sources are usually created and preserved by the articulate and the powerful, people who have rarely considered the lives of their artisans, clerks, peasants, servants and slaves as worthy of consideration, let alone worthy of recording. Thus, achieving a proper appreciation of the lives of the illiterate, in a discipline based largely on reading and analysing written records, is a conundrum that is difficult for conventional historians to address let alone overcome. The records left for historians when they study the poor and the powerless are often what James C. Scott has called the “public transcript” or the official version promulgated by those in power. Reading such public transcripts can be deeply unsatisfying. We suspect that not all peasants thought their lords wonderful, we know that some slaves loathed their masters and mistresses. Similarly we suspect that masters were not really able to levy the degree of control over their subjects they would have liked to believe and often boasted of. What we search for is the ‘private transcript’, the hidden record of how those involved really communicated.<sup>38</sup>

The main primary source used in this thesis comes from a body of documents which may go some way towards redressing the imbalance in the public record, a

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<sup>38</sup> James C. Scott, *Weapons of the weak: everyday forms of peasant resistance*, New Haven 1985.



chance perhaps of hearing, if only in whispered tones, the murmurings of the masses beneath the pall of elite and official control. These records have been preserved at the Public Record Office in London, and concern the reports of Fiscals in the British colony of Berbice and the united colonies of Demerara and Essequibo, all situated on the north-eastern coast of South America in the second and third decades of the nineteenth century. They provide one of the fullest recorded accounts of slave life in the British-speaking Western hemisphere, and promise to allow historians an unusual glimpse into how slaves viewed their lives and the society they inhabited. This large body of records not only provides a detailed survey of the conditions and work practices in these colonies, but also contains considerable testimony from slaves, outlining complaints in the slaves' own words, against their masters and managers (and, on occasion, other slaves). It allows us to glimpse how these people understood slavery, their society, and the wider society of the New World.

The documents reveal a breadth of concerns that underline the disparate nature of Africans in the Americas. The slaves emerge from the pages of the Fiscal's reports, not as a massed congregation of oppressed, but as individuals who, even while sharing some general apprehensions about their condition, were capable of asserting themselves within the society they created. Responses from the white minority, usually as defendants, not only confirm slaves' true humanity and individuality, but also reveal the irony of a society where African Americans often responded to their environment each in a variety of idiosyncratic ways, while their white owners and managers were constrained by the duty of solidarity, forever conscious of their numerical inferiority and the need to present consistent and homogenous opposition to the demands from slaves. Masters, managers and officials

were constantly ‘under the necessity’<sup>39</sup> of punishing insubordinate conduct from slaves, for they and their European colleagues maintained the thinnest of thin blue lines, holding back, like the dykes that protected their estates along the Guiana coast from the ocean tides, a flood of imagined black protest should they show the least sign of weakness.

As with all documentary evidence that has come to us through official hands, we need to address the possibility of inaccurate transcription, and of any effects which official intimidation had on those offering testimony. These particular documents seem, however, to be surprisingly candid. Consider the complaint of the slave Dundass on plantation New Forest in 1824:

The manager punish me, he beat me with a soldiers cutlass till I fell down, I said massa you want to kill me, he replied I don’t care for Fiscal, or Governor or your own master, I said you don’t care for them gentlemen I must [go] there before you kill me. Punch saw him beat me with the cutlass and then called the driver to flog me with carracarras and I was flogged thus. My buttocks swelled and I got here with difficulty. All the Dienaars saw the state I was in.<sup>40</sup>

The wording and content give little or no hint of interference from the recording clerk, and if the clerk entertained some bias in favour of the manager’s case, it would appear to have had little impact. In the case of Dundass, his testimony was believed against that of the manager’s, and the manager was fined. But it is not so important to know whether the testimony was believed by the officials. What is more important is knowing that it was recorded accurately. This appears to be the case with these records. The following testimony from Louis on plantation Brighton was

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<sup>39</sup> If any expression can be said to characterise the responses of managers to their slaves resistance it would be this one, occurring in a significant number of responses to slave complaints.

<sup>40</sup> CO 116/140, Berbice Complaints of Slaves Made to the Fiscal. (In 5 Sections covering the period 8th January 1824 to 28th December 1825), complaint of 30 April 1824, (Hereafter: CB2, 30 April 1824).

rejected by the Fiscal on the reply by the manager and other witnesses, but Louis's words still inform us about what aggrieved him and about how he felt about his life:

Since I came to this country I have belonged to two owners, I am not lazy nor a runaway, I am willing to work, but Mrs. Fraser deprives me of my holidays and Sundays. I am digging trench to hold water for cattle. She gives me 4 roods of trench to dig six feet wide two shovel deep. She calls Mr. McKay to give me the work, if I finish it in time she says I have not had enough. Mr. McKay knows nothing of this country work. In the evening I am to bring him bundles of wood, one for the kitchen one for the watchman, she directs me to sleep where the cattle are. I have no time to get my food till she goes to sleep. Last holiday Sunday was taken from me. I was sent on the Saturday at eleven o'clock with the sheep I was to take to the butcher, then now big with lamb, I slept at Mr. Brittlebank's at night, one of them dropped her lamb, they died, Mr. Brittlebank told me go back to misses to get another sheep to take with the one to town, when I went she said it was my fault, I had not good heart to take the sheep to town for her. My holiday allowance is one mackerel and this broken cassava I have brought to show you (about one cake) – then on Sunday I go to cut wattles on this day to make garden, on Sunday as well as in the week I weed grass – have to carry it away on my head I am the only man there. She sent Mr. Grant to come and flog me, but he refused to do it, as there is no one on the estate I can't bring witness to prove I work on Sunday. I suppose the gentlemen in that neighbourhood may know it. I get one bottle of rice for four days. I get neither cassava nor plantains with it. When the allowance of fish is given she throws it to me with the left hand, she can't bear to see me with her eyes, nor will she allow me to keep a fowl or two.<sup>41</sup>

The text resembles the recording of spoken testimony. The extraneous detail and mixed subject order is typical of speech. Slaves in Berbice spoke with two different 'creole' languages; one based on Dutch and one based on English. By 1819 the Dutch creole was already rare, and confined to those plantations where the Dutch language was still in use.<sup>42</sup> As the English creole was based on English, with simplified grammar and pronunciation, it was reasonably easy for managers and

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<sup>41</sup> CB2, 10 June 1824.

<sup>42</sup> By 1826 there were just 6 plantations which filled out their punishment record books in Dutch, with 865 slaves residing on these plantations, or about 5% of the slave population, (PB1).

officials to become fluent.<sup>43</sup> Certainly there is no evidence that any misunderstanding arose as a consequence of the use of creole patois by slaves. Where Dutch creole was used in testimony a specialist translator was brought in.<sup>44</sup> The patois of the slave was smoothed over by the clerk, but the testimony indicates a running transcription which would have left the clerk little time to edit. The manuscript itself shows that punctuation is haphazard and often omitted, evidence that the clerk struggled to form written sentences from the testimony. The testimony usually begins more formally, and can be in the second person, but often shifts to the first person, further evidence that the clerk was less able to formalise the language as the testimony proceeded. For example the evidence of slave James Campbell begins formally and in the second person:

Evidence of the negro Jas. Campbell: States that one Sunday he saw one of the women crying witness in inquiring the cause was told that Rhina had tied his the witnesses country man's hands and taken him to the Driver<sup>45</sup>

As the testimony proceeds, however, the clerk switched tense in mid sentence, presumably to keep up with the testimony:

the woman who was crying had been formerly the old man's wife by old man, I mean Mamadoe. I went to the driver Watson's house and learnt the old man was tied because he had not cured Rhina's country man's wife who was sick

From there on the testimony was in the first person. Neither the form nor the content suggests official bias or some sort of moderating interference by managers. No evidence of any kind can be certain not to be contaminated in some way, but as far as

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<sup>43</sup> See for example, CB2, 20 November 1825 and CB2, 28 October 1820. The patois has persisted to this day and I myself was reasonably fluent within a couple of weeks whilst in New Amsterdam during my research.

<sup>44</sup> CB3, 2 January 1827.

<sup>45</sup> CB2, 8 November 1824.

evidence is capable of representing what a slave had said in the early nineteenth century; this is as good as it gets. Whatever interpretation modern historians might place on the testimony, they can be safely assumed to have reflected the meaning and sentiments of the slaves and managers concerned. While it is possible that the slaves withheld some alternative view out of fear of retribution, the content of the recorded testimony simply does not suggest this to have been the case. If slaves routinely insult the managers and accuse their masters of all kinds of infamy with their testimony, it is hard to understand what they may have withheld. Naturally that does not preclude the possibility that those giving their evidence were not telling the truth, and this possibility applies equally to slave, manager and official. Moreover it should not be assumed that the evidence of a slave will support another slave, neither should it be assumed that the evidence of a white manager will support the defence of his white employer.<sup>46</sup> One of the key elements of the documents was that they were recorded at the time, with the facts and the evidence fresh in the minds of the complainants, defendants and witnesses – thus any lies would have been quite deliberate, rather than as a result of a memory clouded by the passing of time. In many if not most of the testimonies, the facts of the matter were not in dispute. In such cases what was in dispute was the interpretation offered those facts by the two sides or the extenuating circumstances pertaining to those facts.

The records are also important because of the character of the colonies from which these records emanated, and the nature of the records themselves. It was only

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<sup>46</sup> For example a complaint by the slave Tommy against his owner William Fraser of excessive punishment was defended by Fraser who maintained that he had only given the legal limit of 39 lashes. However one of Fraser's employees, the overseer Samuel Wilcox, testified that Fraser had exceeded the limit by 2 lashes, and thus Fraser was found guilty and punished by the Fiscal, (CB1 9 February 1819).

after the colonies became British that they turned fully to plantation agriculture and to the large-scale importation of African labour. British occupation also brought with it a preference for sugar over cotton and coffee, especially in Demerara and Essequibo. The influence of agriculture on social development has been well documented in Philip D. Morgan's excellent and thorough comparison of two southern slave cultures in *Slave Counterpoint*.<sup>47</sup> Morgan's work demonstrates that the world of slaves was not a homogeneous cultural experience, but one which developed distinct regional characteristics, owing as much to environmental circumstances as to the enveloping condition of slavery. Moreover, because of the massive influx of slaves following the British take over in 1803, which resulted in more than three quarters of the adult population being born in Africa,<sup>48</sup> the established practices created by the existing society would have been heavily moderated. So, although the records pertain to slavery in its final decades within the British Empire, they can also be said to reflect many of the elements common to a frontier society, or what Barry Higman terms third-phase sugar colonies, reminiscent less of contemporary Jamaica, Barbados or South Carolina than of their seventeenth and eighteenth century predecessors.<sup>49</sup> Thus, the Fiscals' reports provide a vivid picture of a slave society which was as close to the slave societies in earlier settled regions of the Atlantic World in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as to more mature slave societies during the early nineteenth century.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Philip D. Morgan, *Slave counterpoint: black culture in the eighteenth century Chesapeake and Lowcountry*, Chapel Hill 1998.

<sup>48</sup> See Tables 1.1 and 1.2 in this chapter.

<sup>49</sup> Higman, *Slave populations*.

<sup>50</sup> A useful discussion of slave-master relations in Demerara is Emilia Viotti da Costa, *Crowns of glory, tears of blood, the Demerara slave rebellion of 1823*, New York 1994, 39-86. We badly lack a modern study of Berbice and Demerara-Essequibo between 1807 and 1834.

Altogether, the reports of the office of the Fiscal in Berbice and the reports of the Protectors of Slaves in Demerara-Essequibo amount to 24 large volumes, comprising perhaps 10,000 pages of information about slave life in the developing plantation societies of British Guiana. They are collected in the Public Record Office, catalogued as Colonial Office, Class 116, Volumes 138-163. Volumes 138 to 153 cover the reports of the Fiscal and the reports of the Protectors of Slaves in Berbice between 1819 and 1834. Volumes 157 to 163 contain the reports of the Protector of Slaves in Demerara-Essequibo. In addition, the Public Record Office holds four volumes within Series 111 relating to individual judges in Demerara between 1820 and 1830.<sup>51</sup> Despite the prominence of the repository and the size of the deposit, virtually no use has been made to date of the records. The only scholar to make extensive use of the Fiscals' Reports is Emilia Viotti da Costa in her account of the Demerara Slave Rebellion of 1823. Mary Turner has also reviewed the cases slaves brought against their masters in Berbice in an article on women and work but she used only the printed summaries of these records collected in Parliamentary Papers.<sup>52</sup> The Fiscals' Reports, therefore, constitute that rare commodity – a rich and virtually untapped body of raw evidence concerning the lives of slaves in the period of slavery.

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<sup>51</sup> The full references are as follows: Fiscals' Reports, 1819-1832 Berbice – C.O. 116/138-142; Reports of Protectors of Slaves, 1826-34, Berbice – C.O.116/143-53; Report of Protector of Slaves and Fiscals' Reports, Demerara-Essequibo – C.O.116/156; Reports of Protectors of Slaves, 1830-34, Demerara-Essequibo – C.O. 157-63; C.O.111/33 – Martin Doyle's Case, 1820; C.O.111/38 – Mr Sullivan's Case, 1822; C.O.111/52 – Mr. R.C. Story's Case, 1825; C.O.111/113 – Mr Peter Nicholson's Case, 1828-30.

<sup>52</sup> Da Costa, *Crowns of glory*; Mary Turner, "The 11 o'clock flog: women, work and labour law in the British Caribbean," *Slavery and Abolition*, v20(1), April 1999, pp.38-58. Printed summaries of slave reports can be found in Parliamentary Papers, House of Commons, 1825 XXV 476 Further Papers relating to Slaves in the West Indies: Demerara and Berbice and Parliamentary Papers, House of Commons, 1829 XXV 335, Protector of Slaves Reports.

Although the documents contain a wide variety of material, most of the records can be categorised into seven types.

1. Manuscript copies of complaints of slaves made to the Fiscal, Berbice.<sup>53</sup>
2. Manuscript copies of cases brought to the Court of Criminal Justice, Berbice.
3. Printed copies of complaints of slaves made to the Fiscal, Berbice.<sup>54</sup>
4. Printed copies of complaints of slaves made to the Protectors of Slaves, Berbice and Demerara & Essequibo.<sup>55</sup>
5. Manuscript copies of the punishment record books which were compulsorily kept by plantations, Berbice.<sup>56</sup>
6. Printed copies of compiled punishment returns, Demerara & Essequibo.<sup>57</sup>
7. Miscellaneous documents.

The manuscript copies of complaints of slaves made to the Fiscal in Berbice constitute barely half of one of the 24 volumes (CO 116/140) – 365 unnumbered pages out of 10,000 – but they are among the most valuable. Being hand-written manuscripts<sup>58</sup> they are the most immediate, and have undergone the least amount of editorial interference. That is not to say that the type-written records misrepresented slave testimony, but they sometimes omitted the superfluous detail, which, while perhaps not pertinent to the case at hand, is extremely valuable to the historian.

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<sup>53</sup> CB2.

<sup>54</sup> CB1.

<sup>55</sup> CO 116/143, "Berbice. Complaints of Slaves made to the Protectors Office, Berbice, 2nd November 1826 to 31st August 1827" (Hereafter: CB3).

<sup>56</sup> These contained in: CO 116/143, "Punishment Records from 1st November 1826 to 31 July 1827" (Hereafter: PB1).

<sup>57</sup> CO 116/153, Protector of Slaves Reports. Part 1 Demerara (Hereafter: PD1).

<sup>58</sup> The word 'manuscript' and 'MSS' will be taken to mean only hand-written manuscripts.



These documents were the first to record all the testimonies, including those from witnesses and manager defendants. These documents cover complaints made in the years 1824 and 1825. Though only 93 actions were brought during this period, they involved some 231 complainants who expressed a total of 641 grievances.<sup>59</sup>

Together with the earlier complaints<sup>60</sup> and the complaints made after the Protector of Slaves was appointed,<sup>61</sup> the complaints of slaves record 337 slave complaints involving 768 complainants expressing 1,924 grievances, and with witnesses, defendants and officials more than fifteen hundred individuals are thus documented. When the punishment records are included, with their descriptions of behavioural incidents involving nearly four thousand named individual slaves (about 20 percent of the total population), the package offers some genuine opportunities to profile a large number of slaves and managers living and working in Berbice at this time.

### **Fiscals**

We only have these records because of the historical accidents through which Berbice, Demerara and Essequibo came into British hands. Alone of the British possessions in the Caribbean, these three colonies had an official known as a Fiscal who was responsible for ensuring adherence to the *Rule on the Treatment of Servants and Slaves* that the Dutch had instituted in 1772 as a way of curbing slave unrest. Under the terms of the British acquisition from the Dutch in 1803, the British were

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<sup>59</sup> CB2.

<sup>60</sup> CB1.

<sup>61</sup> CB3.

obliged to retain the bureaucratic structure of the colonies. Thus the Fiscal remained. The significant feature of his office was that slaves had the right to appeal to him for redress for violations against the slave codes.<sup>62</sup> In essence, the office of the Fiscal was an equitable jurisdiction for slaves who were otherwise denied access to ordinary courts. The Dutch had inherited the office from the Spaniards who in turn had borrowed it from the Romans. An analogous institution had existed in the Dutch African colony of the Cape but there was no office like it elsewhere in the British Empire.<sup>63</sup> In the period of Dutch rule, the Fiscal's office had established itself as a powerful institution. Under the Dutch system perpetuated by the British, owners and managers were penalised for failing to resolve conflicts on the estate, having to pay 12 guilders for every slave who appeared in front of the Fiscal and more than double that for each slave punished at the town jail for lodging a complaint judged to be unfounded. As Mary Turner concedes, "the slaves' right to lay grievances before a high-ranking, salaried official legitimised and, arguably, gave added value to their estate based struggles."<sup>64</sup>

The Fiscal was the chief legal officer of Berbice. Before 1814 the Fiscal had taken one third of all the fines and charges levied against slave owners and managers; thus the Fiscals had had a vested interest in slaves bringing complaint actions against their managers. The Fiscal's third share of fines, on top of his salary, had made him one of the best paid officers in the West Indies. Moreover, it had set up a precedent for slave access to a complaint process, something Rodway suggests the Fiscals may even have encouraged:

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<sup>62</sup> See Shahabuddeen, *The legal system of Guyana*.

<sup>63</sup> For the Cape, see Robert Ross, *Cape of torment: slavery and resistance in South Africa*, London 1983.

<sup>64</sup> Turner, "The 11 o'clock flog," 41.

As the expenses of the Court of Justice were considerable, it often happened that something more than the Fiscal's third found its way into his pocket ... which made him very sharp in pouncing on breaches of the regulations as to roads, slaves, &c.<sup>65</sup>

After the Fiscal lost his one third share of the fines, his salary was increased in compensation, and by 1819 Rodway noted that "the Fiscal ... [received] from £6,000 to £8,000 ... [and this] put him in a better position than the Governor".<sup>66</sup>

Although the Fiscal's share had disappeared a fee was still charged by the Fiscal for each slave bringing an action, regardless of the outcome, and occasionally managers and owners were fined in addition to the fees. Mitigating any traditional support of slave welfare, however, was the fact that Fiscals such as Bennett were slave owners too, and would have been sensitive to the possible reactions of the colonial oligarchy if their actions were deemed repressive. After all, the Fiscal had to live, work and socialise with the small white constituency in the colony, and daily social interaction would surely have influenced his judgement when the actions of his friends and associates were being weighed against those of their slaves.

It would be reasonable to assume that precedents established by the Fiscal's willingness to hear complaints from slaves in the period before 1814 would have influenced subsequent customary duties and practices within the colony. Even after the practice of retaining a portion of the fines was abandoned, the Fiscal remained a very senior official with extremely wide powers. Henry Bolingbroke characterised the fiscal as "the chief magistrate, public accuser, and attorney general, to prosecute

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<sup>65</sup> Rodway, *History of British Guiana*, v2, p.104.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p.104.

in all cases for the sovereign.”<sup>67</sup> The Fiscal even had his own police force, called ‘dienaars’, and continued to prosecute cases of slave complaint even after the appointment of a Protector of Slaves, created by the British as part of the 1826 amelioration of slavery ordinances.<sup>68</sup> Thus, supported as they were by the entrenched power of the Fiscal, the new Protectors of Slaves in the Guianas were much more effective and considerably more influential than the Protectors of Slaves employed elsewhere in the British Caribbean after 1826. Given the long and customary tradition of slaves in the Guianas being able to take their grievances to an official for redress, it is not surprising that the documentation generated by the new Protectors of Slaves in the Guianas greatly exceeded that available elsewhere in the British West Indies.<sup>69</sup>

Mary Turner has described the Fiscal’s principal role as one which would “mediate conflict in the best interest of slave property owners, sparing the manager legal prosecution and reinforcing where possible the attorney’s authority”, but this is very misleading. Certainly the Fiscal, as a property and slave owner, was materially sympathetic to management, but this did not define his role. Nor did he “spare” the managers from prosecution. Few other slave holding societies at this time offered legal redress to slaves, so the efforts of the Fiscal, no matter how inadequate or

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<sup>67</sup> Bolingbroke, *A voyage to Demerary*, p. 52. Some of the Fiscal’s office’s history may be found in PP23, appendix J (confirming his anomalous position within the British Empire), see also Dalton, *The history of British Guiana*, pp.273-274.

<sup>68</sup> The Protector of Slaves was an appointment common to most of the British West Indies after 1826. In Berbice and Demerara-Essequibo, however, the new Protector took over that part of the Fiscals duties which pertained to the welfare of slaves. Because the Guianas had a tradition of slave access to official redress it is reasonable to assume that the office of the Protector in the Guianas was more effective than elsewhere in the Caribbean. Moreover, the Fiscal remained chief prosecutor, and so in some instances the Protector of Slaves referred slaves to the Fiscal for further, more serious legal action, and this would also have strengthened the Protector’s position in the Guianas.

<sup>69</sup> C.O. 116/155, Appendix One.

unjust, could not spare a manager from prosecution. Without him there was not even the possibility of prosecution, and you cannot spare someone from something which had no chance of occurring. Moreover, as will become evident in subsequent chapters, the records show that favourable outcomes for slaves were not uncommon. Indeed, slaves fared better from the complaint process than did defendants, achieving a higher percentage of positive outcomes than did owners and managers.<sup>70</sup>

Additionally, any action brought by a slave incurred a fee charged to owners and managers by the Fiscal for each complaint made regardless of the Fiscal's judgment on the matter. If a slave was punished by the Fiscal for proffering a 'false' complaint, the owner was charged an additional fee for administering the punishment, on top of any other costs incurred by the Fiscal for his investigation. Far from "neatly exposing how the system worked" Turner has in fact obscured the most relevant feature of the Fiscal's office, which was to give slaves an official voice within their society.<sup>71</sup>

## **Methodology and Structure**

When the Fiscal, H. M. Bennett, in his letter to Sir B. D'Urban, noted that "nine times out of ten they [the complaints] proceed from the most indolent and worthless negroes on the estates",<sup>72</sup> he may not have been that far from the truth. Though "nine times out of ten" is excessive, certainly many of the slaves revealed in the complaint

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<sup>70</sup> See the Tables: 2.4, 2.5 and 4.1.

<sup>71</sup> Turner, "The 11 O'clock Flog", p.45.

<sup>72</sup> CO 116/138, Extract of Letter addressed to Sir B. D'Urban, by Mr. M. S. Bennett, Fiscal of Berbice, dated Berbice, 21<sup>st</sup> January 1826.

records with very personal and idiosyncratic grievances prove to be 'outsiders', and were recognised as such by both slaves and management.<sup>73</sup> Dissident individuals highlight one of the main problems for historians examining documents for evidence about the nature of a society. All testimony is generated by an individual, and in a narrow sense it represents only the ideas and attitudes of that particular individual. On the other hand, a society is constructed from collections of individuals and their collective sensibilities. The task for the historian, therefore, is to discern which testimony is representative and which is not, or to devise a method of inferring representative attitudes from non representative individuals.

The complaints of slaves could be argued to represent only the grievances of slaves who were inclined to complain. This alone would distinguish them from the rest of their society. But the expectations, consistent social responses, and the normative understanding of the actors involved in the complaint process can only reflect general social standards. Thus, while the ideas expressed within the text may be attributable only to the speaker, the language and framework of the testimony belongs to his or her society.<sup>74</sup> Moreover, many of the complaints brought by slaves can be said to be complaints brought on behalf of their community, and so represent communal rather than individual grievances. These representative complaints can be established either by the context and circumstances of the complaint, the number of complainants involved in the complaint, or whether the issues involved can be supported by other evidence such as quantitative data from the punishment records.

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<sup>73</sup> See for example the stories of Harry in Chapter 4, and Woensdag in Chapter 5.

<sup>74</sup> Though this is not intended to be a socio-linguistic analysis, the relationship between language and society has certainly been taken into account. Chapter Seven includes some linguistic analysis of the words slave and negro within the documents, relating this to the increased racialisation of slaves in the New World. See (Benjamin Lee Whorf, *Language, thought, and reality: selected writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf*, John B. Carroll, (ed.), Cambridge Mass. 1956).

One persistent difficulty with the historiography of slavery has been the temptation for some historians to use a few available scraps of documentary evidence to exemplify general behaviour and to use the scant information to construct an interpretative model of slavery. The records of one particular estate may provide rich detail of life on that plantation, but, as the records from Berbice show, plantations in Berbice varied enormously in style and character, and a 'typical' estate is not easy to locate. Perhaps this was a feature of plantations peculiar to Berbice, but that seems hardly likely. Even more difficult to locate is a typical slave. The word slave is a curse to the historian, not just because it is so hard to avoid, but because its repetitive use wears away a person's humanity and individuality. Consequently some attempt has been made to limit the use of the word 'slave' where possible, especially in contexts where the designation is not material. Moreover, many of the issues revealed in the documents applied to some degree to non-slaves, such as free coloureds. Quite often words such as resident, person, worker, African (for those born in Africa) and Creole (for those born in Berbice) can substitute for the deadening word slave.

One problem with documentary evidence as rich as that found in the Fiscals' records is the problem of choice. With so many fascinating cases, it is hard to decide which to include and which to leave for another time. Every piece of documentary evidence is capable of adding another spot of colour to the portrait we have of Berbice society. Knowing which segments best fill out the overall picture has not been easy. Some of the evidence selected will define a central feature of the society, while other evidence may only provide background texture. Where evidence is consistent and commonplace, the process can be relatively straightforward. More

often, however, it is necessary to read around the text for clues about socially normative behaviour. In all cases care has been taken not to take the testimony at face value. Mary Turner, using some of the same documents, too readily accepted the testimony of the slaves as fact, while at the same time dismissing the testimony of management or officials as hopelessly biased.<sup>75</sup> Slaves were just as capable of exaggeration or falsehood as were managers and owners. Used correctly, statements of uncertain veracity can be valuable testimony, but to assume veracity is foolish. Generally, there is very much more information in the text than just the descriptions of events pertinent to a particular case.

Throughout the thesis I have often used long extracts from single cases. These were stories the slaves told in their own words. To dissect the narratives into snippets of phrases lashed together in patterns imposed by the historian severs the link between the individual and the reader. Moreover, we are often searching for the subtle messages of testimony, not just the raw details, and these can often be lost if only small pieces of the text are presented. The selection of a case depends on several factors. As suggested earlier, the complaint cases from 1824 and 1825 (CB2) have often been preferred to those either side of this period because these are unedited manuscript records and are hence closer to the actors involved. Moreover, some of the early cases (the ones used by Mary Turner) do not include much evidence from witnesses or from defendants and do not often record comments or results from the Fiscal, and are thus less useful than the more complete cases.

The thesis has been structured in several parts. The first part includes chapters two, three, four, and five, which delve into aspects of the lives of slaves as revealed

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<sup>75</sup> Turner, "The 11 o'clock flog".



by the documents. The aim has been to highlight work regimes, cultural practices, and personal priorities while at the same time emphasizing the essential humanity of the actors, whether slave or free, black, white or coloured. Jaques Barzun in his most recent work has described the historian as “a storyteller who tries to unfold the intricate plot woven by the actions of men, women, and teenagers”, and he sees the desires of those actors as “the motive power of history.”<sup>76</sup> These four chapters will try and explore the lives of the actors involved in this period of Berbice’s social history with Barzun’s dictum in mind. Chapter Six concentrates on the options slaves had outside of slavery. Chapter Seven examines the punishment and coercion of slaves in Berbice, while Chapter Eight will look at Berbice values such as freedom, materialism and race. Chapter Nine reviews the subsequent rational choices made by slaves and offers closure to the thesis. Statistical information is distributed throughout the thesis.

## **The Secrets**

There are many aspects of the lives of those from the past which will remain hidden, secret not so much by intent as by circumstance. The lives of those long dead, within societies which have long since changed, will never be completely transparent to observers from this time and place. Larry Hudson, reporting about the Rochester Work and Culture Conference of 1993, claims to have been “reminded that the slaves and their world retain a near impenetrable shield; that any conclusion derived from

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<sup>76</sup> Jaques Barzun, *From dawn to decadence: 500 years of Western cultural life: 1500 to the present*, New York 2000, p.xvi.

one particular glimpse into the private world of the slave is often quickly countered by an opposite ‘picture’.<sup>77</sup> However, this position seems to expect that slaves existed as a homogenous entity, and thus capable of producing a neat ‘group photograph’. But these people were just human beings who were labelled ‘slave’ by other human beings, and so should, and did, display all the contradictions and idiosyncrasies found among all individuals within a society. Consider what evidence of slavery has been formed from the ideas of a handful of literate and extraordinary former slaves such as Olaudah Equiano and Frederick Douglass. While the experiences of these men speak volumes about their intelligence and personal fortitude, and inform us that Africans were just as capable of producing great statesmen as were Europeans, they do not help us to explain the behaviour of the majority of slaves, who, like the majority of any population, had to draw upon more modest personal resources to cope with their life situations.

The problem which Larry Hudson was alluding to was that historians, equipped with the evidence of only a handful of slaves, still feel the need to explain how slaves behaved collectively, and are consequently distressed at finding individuals who do not fit their models. Models of slave behaviour based on such small samples, and having been necessarily taken only from those who were capable of finding a voice in a society committed to denying them a hearing, are not likely to be able to explain the behaviour of the majority of slaves. Models of slave life based on a few examples coupled to a theoretical model of enslavement are more likely to produce caricatures of slaves rather than real people. To study slavery from such models is

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<sup>77</sup> Larry E. Hudson Jr., “Introduction”, in Larry E. Hudson Jr., (ed.), *Working towards freedom: slave society and domestic economy in the American South*, New York 1994, p.vii.

essentially self referential and circular: a model of slavery is constructed, evidence relating to slavery is found, then that evidence is discussed within the dictums of that model. The outcome bears a closer resemblance to the historian's own sensibilities than to those of the subjects of his or her study.

It is here that the spread and depth of the information provided by the Fiscal's documents comes into its own. The complaint record is virtually complete for a period of nine years,<sup>78</sup> while the punishment record books detail all the offences of named individual slaves from every plantation in the colony for a period of eight months. With so much information available some very basic questions regarding both the collective behaviour of slaves, and the individual lives they led, are capable of being reliably answered. As the lives of slaves in Berbice come to life in the Fiscal's documents, their character and personality also take form and substance, and the first secrets emerge: that their lives did not seem so different from the lives of individuals in any large society, and that they were not so traumatised by the conditions of slavery as to act in incomprehensible ways. Half of all slaves in Berbice in the 1820's were African born,<sup>79</sup> and if any population of slaves at this time in the New World should have displayed signs of psychological damage due to slavery, it would be expected to show up among these people. The traumatic effects of the middle passage and the shock of European enslavement have been argued to have severely affected slave behaviour, but the slaves who speak to us through the Fiscal's documents seem remarkably familiar. There are few of Elkins's 'sambos' or Patterson's natively-naked and dishonoured slaves among the people we learn about,

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<sup>78</sup> There is a gap between the last of the surviving Fiscal's record of 28 December 1825 to the first of the Protector of Slave's records of 2 November 1826 and another smaller gap between 14 June 1823 to 8 January 1824.

<sup>79</sup> See Table 1.2 above.

and though these slaves are the slaves of Berbice and nowhere else, their behaviour must also be added to the evidence guiding historians seeking answers to generalist notions of enslavement.

Evident also from the slaves of Berbice is that they did not respond to slavery in uniform ways. Factions emerged, and responses varied, and most slaves were united only by their mutual desire to be free from the restrictions imbedded within their position in Berbice society. It would be interesting to speculate as to whether the very strong communal and kinship bonds which slaves established in Berbice partly accounted for the difficulty they had of forming larger quasi-political formations – formations which may have been more effective in challenging many aspects of slavery. Slaves in Berbice formed their own complex and multi-tiered society composed of a variety of communities and kinship networks. The slaves in Berbice cooperated with their forced labour only within certain limits they themselves helped to set. They may have been resigned to their positions as slaves, but only continued to put up with that position under certain conditions, even if those conditions would vary between different individuals. Ultimately, when the conditions of their enslavement became too onerous they would protest, bring actions against their managers, or simply leave slavery and go to the bush. With that in mind it will be seen that managers and officials needed to heed customary rights and customary work regimes to ensure slave cooperation. The exercise of total control over the lives of slaves by managers and owners was never realistically possible.

Regardless of the circumstances they found themselves in, the Africans who came to Berbice were migrants, and few if any would ever see their native lands again. After surviving the initial shock of enslavement and an alien culture they

would, like all migrants, have to settle in their new place, and work towards improving their condition over time. That they were influenced by their interaction with European ideas and customs is undeniable, and a consistent theme of their testimonies will demonstrate that their own interpretations of European customs and social structures would in the end define the culture and society that emerged in the Guianas.

## Chapter 2: Working Life in Berbice 1

### Preamble

It was Thursday, the seventh day of April in the year 1825, the time early dawn. Too early yet for the sun to well up liquid red over the tops of the wallaba trees and the tall palms that fringed the Berbice river.<sup>80</sup> Too early even for the watchmen's fires to be dowsed, their auric glow still ranged protectively over the kokers, and the punts and coriaals<sup>81</sup> moored in the canals nearby. And too early for the cocks that lived around the peoples' houses to start crowing; only the goatsucker's eerie cries and the murmurings of the workers as they began to stir in their homes could be heard, and though the nightjar would soon be resting, for the slaves, overseers and managers, the workday had only just begun.

On plantation Herstelling, as the night sky began to pale before the approaching sun, the gang began to assemble before the logie buildings, a collection of various structures which stood, along with a 'hospital' and a storeroom, at the hub of plantation organisation. From here, at six o'clock, the bell would be struck to

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<sup>80</sup> For a description of the river and colony of Berbice see Bollingbroke, *A Voyage to Demerary*, for how it might have been in 1806 and Dalton, *The history of British Guiana*, for how it was in 1842. See also Robert H. Schomburgh, *A description of British Guiana, geographical and statistical*, London 1840. The wallaba tree was valued for its timber and was plentiful along the lower Berbice river.

<sup>81</sup> Small boats which were used to navigate the canal and river system. There were few if any roads and these craft often represented the only means of transportation from place to place in the colony at this time. Various spelled in the documents, e.g.: 'coriall', 'coryall'.

assemble the workers.<sup>82</sup> The management team, led by Robert Kennedy, along with his overseers, Richard Jones and James Northey, and the head driver Samson, walked to their posts and refreshed their lungs with the dewy morning air, each making the most of the only cool period of any day in Berbice, a moment when the country in which they lived and worked could seem almost bearable.<sup>83</sup> There were mumblings among the gang, and it is perhaps surprising that the managers, overseers, and drivers did not sense, in the mood of the workers as they swelled to fill the logie yard, some trouble brewing. There had been talk among the slaves for some days about the manager, unpopular since he had first come to the estate. Percy, Burns and Dido had been especially outspoken and had stated that either the manager would have to go or they would go to the bush – a bad manager could make a lousy job intolerable.<sup>84</sup>

As the logie began to fill, so the slave quarters began to empty. But not all those who had spent the night in the slave quarters would be reporting for duty. Two men staying with Fox and Caroline had spent the night with their customers, having traded property stolen from nearby plantations. Unlike Fox and Caroline, however, they belonged to no plantation, and had no regular work to go to. They were ‘bush negroes’ or ‘maroons’,<sup>85</sup> and would have to disappear soon or risk discovery.<sup>86</sup> The

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<sup>82</sup> The working day began at six o’clock and was commonly signalled by a bell. At eleven o’clock the workers broke for lunch, often signalled by a crack of the driver’s whip, work resumed at one o’clock and ended at five or six, signalled by gunfire.

<sup>83</sup> For description of managers’ and overseers’ early morning routines see, Dalton, *The history of British Guiana*, p.324 & pp.330-331.

<sup>84</sup> Percy, Burns and Dido eventually absconded and remained in the bush, (CB2, 14 April 1825).

<sup>85</sup> In Berbice as elsewhere in British Guiana, the term used for established runaways was ‘bush negroes’ while the term used in Dutch Guiana was ‘Maroon’. Berbice being close to Dutch Guiana, it is probable that bush negroes were made up from runaways and their descendents from both colonies.

<sup>86</sup> Fox was later punished for “encouraging bush negroes & harbouring them in the negro houses” and Caroline for “having received stolen property from the bush negroes, she knowing the same to have been stolen”. Moses, Frank and Eliza were also punished for the same offences, (PB1, Herstelling 28 December 1826).

men slipped quietly into the dense scrub which bordered the canals and separated the thin strips of cultivated plantations, lined up along the banks of the river like matchsticks on end.<sup>87</sup> The bush negroes, like all the inhabitants of the colony, were as different as they were alike, and, as they finally departed the cultivated region of Berbice for the forests of West Berbice, they would have carried in their minds the reasoning behind the life they had chosen to live. Their lives as bush negroes, like the lives of the workers or the managers and overseers on Herstelling they had left behind, consisted of compromises and trade offs. Few would have been unreservedly contented with their choices in life, as few would have been abjectly dissatisfied with them. The bush negroes had rejected slavery, and thus had rejected plantation labour, and so would seem to have little relevance to the life of work they had left behind. Yet their existence, and their definite and continuous interaction with the workers of the plantations, underlined the choice of work made by the majority of the people in the region.

### **The position of work**

Without plantation labour and its produce, Berbice in the 1820's would have barely existed; a fort perhaps, with attendant military and naval personnel, a motley gang of settlers huddled in shacks about its perimeter, a few boats moored in the mud nearby, but little more. Berbice would have been no more than an outpost of empire held as

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<sup>87</sup> Plantations were usually very long and thin, rarely more than 300 metres wide, and up to 4 or 5 kilometres long, thus sharing the cost of maintaining the sea wall. See Bollingbroke, *A voyage to Demerary*.



much to deny its acquisition by some rival European power as for any material purpose. Without plantation labour and its produce, neither the slaves, nor their associated managers, overseers, and attorneys, would have been there. The slaves would have been in their African villages, the managers in their British and European ones, home among family and friends. Berbice would have been, and would most likely have remained, a very distant and insignificant piece of soggy real estate, a burden on whichever European power was unlucky enough to have possessed it.<sup>88</sup>

Plantation labour and its produce, therefore, constituted the essence of the colony's being. Nearly all the inhabitants were there to work for the profitable operation of plantation agriculture, and those who were not, were there to support those who were. Work occupied the locus around which most other aspects of colonial life revolved, and plantation work underscored the entire social structure of the colony, effecting all aspects of the lives of its residents. Society, kinship and culture – the offspring of life in Berbice – can trace in their expression the common ancestor of plantation labour. And the vast majority of that labour was supplied by slaves.

While highlighting some aspects of working life in Berbice in the 1820's this and the following chapter will visit the front lines of dispute between management and worker, where negotiation and confrontation had upset the equilibrium between accommodation and resistance which presided over most of the workplaces in the colony for most of the time. The working arrangements of most managers and most

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<sup>88</sup> A 'counter factual' exists in the nearby French colony of Cayenne or French Guiana. An attempt to colonise the country with free settlers was made in 1763, but of 12,000 migrants only 2,000 returned to France after the colony's collapse. Slaves were introduced, but at a time when revolutionary activity in France thwarted efforts of control and again the colony collapsed. With plantations not being able to sustain themselves, the only use the colony became to France was as a penal establishment, (Rodway, *Guiana: British, Dutch, and French*).

slaves were structured around compromise. From Table 2.3 it is found that 74% of plantations, incorporating 65% of all slaves, recorded either no work related complaints or only individual complaints in the nine year period covered by the records. Given that all slaves had equal access to the complaint system, it is reasonable to suppose that while most slaves unquestionably loathed working on plantations, that a majority had at least achieved a satisfactory compromise with their particular working arrangements. When those arrangements failed to meet certain expectations, slaves rarely failed to complain about it. Some 768 slaves took legal action against managers and owners in the nine year period covered by the documents, surely making the slaves of Berbice among the most litigious group of workers in history.<sup>89</sup> Additionally, many of the grievances demonstrate that even very small alterations to established work practices could to make a complaint. Thus, the silent majority were not likely to have been harbouring deep seated and important grievances about their working lives. While it is certainly true that some individuals will refrain from protest even in the most arduous of circumstances, this cannot be said for the majority. Most slaves who did not present a case of complaint probably had no grievance they believed they could reasonably expect to have redressed.

In Berbice, workers on both sides of the managerial divide worked together to make plantation agriculture profitable for absentee and local landlords. Managers were particularly aware of this, their job depended upon it. Slaves also demonstrated that they at least understood their role in the plantation system and understood that so

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<sup>89</sup> Taking just the adult population (19 years and over), about 5% of the workforce would prosecute a legal action during the period.

long as they cooperated with the slave system they needed to cooperate with the profitable operation of their plantations. John Blassingame has called the plantation “a battlefield where slaves fought masters for physical and psychological survival”.<sup>90</sup> Such bellicose statements have only marginal relevance to the world of work in Berbice – though the battlefields did occasionally exist, they were easily outnumbered by reasonably peaceful fields of sugar, cotton and coffee. While most plantation workers would have been aware of the need to maintain a mutually satisfactory status quo, and hence on their guard for any breaches in that arrangement, such matters would have intruded only occasionally on their work-time thoughts. To characterise all slave activity in terms of non-compliance on the basis of occasional incidents of overt resistance is no more justified than to characterise all modern workers as universally discontented on the basis of an occasional strike. When slaves in Berbice did become sufficiently discontented, or it seemed that the status quo had been breached, then the plantation could easily become a ‘battlefield’. In such cases the Fiscal soon learned of it, either directly via the complaint process or indirectly through the punishment returns; and through him and his documents, so too can modern historians.

The objectives of slaves and managers in relation to work time and productivity would seem to be diametrically opposed. Theoretically, slaves would have wanted to minimize their plantation work, and to expend as little time and energy on it as they

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<sup>90</sup> John W. Blassingame, *The slave community: plantation life in the Antebellum South*, New York 1979, p.284.

possibly could. As unpaid workers,<sup>91</sup> whatever profit they got from life in Berbice was done in their own time and with their own energy – farming, manufacturing, trading and working in their free time. The harder they worked on the plantation, therefore, the worse off they would be. The less work they were able to get away with doing, however, and the less time they spent doing it, the better off they would be. For plantation owners, the opposite held: maximising profit from the plantation meant maximising productivity over the maximum number of working hours. In practice, of course, these idealized models could rarely become reality, each party would have had to make serious compromises for the system to work at all.

For employed managers and overseers, the situation was even more complicated. They were certainly concerned with productivity, and were answerable to their employers for the profitability of the plantation, but they had also to live among the workers and often related to them not just as managers and overseers, but also as neighbours, friends, lovers, husbands and fathers. To compound the problem, managers were expected to run smooth operations and had to maintain order on the plantation. If slaves were forced to work too hard, they became disgruntled and thus worked less efficiently, or they might even protest or take a complaint to the Fiscal, both involving expenses and losses of work and time. A disorderly plantation reflected badly on managers. Most perilous of all, however, was a strike or a

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<sup>91</sup> Of course all slaves got some form of allowance and accommodation, a kind of 'payment', but these were provided almost regardless of their work. The only time managers could be excused from their obligations to sustenance was when a slave was absent. This contrasts with the waged workers of the nineteenth century who were paid only if they worked, and only as much as their work was valued by management.

‘rebellion’.<sup>92</sup> Not only did it have an impact on the production of the plantation, and reflect on the competence of the manager, it had also the potential to bring down the entire enterprise.

All workers have to be motivated to expend time and energy for someone else’s benefit. While few workers of the early nineteenth century profited much from their labours, the use of slaves as industrial agricultural workers in Berbice served as an extreme example. And, as James Walvin has observed, keeping “slaves at work was no easy matter”.<sup>93</sup> There were alternatives to plantation work, but for most slaves these were synonymous with the alternatives to slavery.<sup>94</sup> But once that choice of plantation work was made, then making the most of the workplace was as much as could be expected from those involved. All individuals expect to have to work to provide themselves with the necessities of life, whether in formal employment, tribal responsibilities or as slaves on plantations. Berbice slaves had to choose between plantation work and informal work in some bush negro community. Though slaves would have had to work harder on a plantation, they might also have expected material conditions to have been better than the material conditions offered in the bush. What made plantation labour more tolerable, beyond the mere avoidance of punishment, varied. There were material and social compensations, lives to be led, holidays to be enjoyed, rum to be drunk, dances to be danced, affairs to be had, families to be raised, food to be eaten, aspirations to be realised. There was no formula for a congenial workplace. Issues of managerial style, working conditions

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<sup>92</sup> Rebellion, mutiny, revolt, are words regularly used by owners and officials in slave societies, and served to dramatise and reinforce the perceived danger in any slave protest. In reality, few of the events labelled rebellion or revolt were anything like that, and most often the more appropriate word would have been strike.

<sup>93</sup> James Walvin, *Questioning slavery*, London 1996, p.49.

<sup>94</sup> The alternatives available to slaves in Berbice are covered in Chapter Six.

and allowances, relations among co-workers, free time, opportunity, liberty, and dignity, all figured to a varying degree and met with varying results depending on the character and personality of the individual workers and managers.

Slaves recognised that they were “purchased to work”.<sup>95</sup> They also understood that slave workers were expected to perform a set of duties associated with their work and their workplace. They understood too that owners expected them to perform these duties. Owners and managers, for their part, knew that slaves needed to moderate their work with free time, to eat adequately, to live in reasonable accommodation, to have decent clothes to wear, to have the opportunity to marry and raise a family. As many of the following cases reveal, the basic rules of the arrangement were rarely in dispute: it was the interpretation, detail and emphasis of such rules which commonly separated workers and management. Some managers were genuinely surprised to find that their workers expected, for example, to have their Sundays free of labour even though their duty lay in furthering the prosperity of the plantation which might occasionally need the slaves to work on that day. Similarly, some slaves could not fathom why they should have to work on their day of rest even though the kokers had burst and threatened to swamp the plantation and ruin an entire harvest.

What emerges from the detail of the documents is that while most cases revolved around issues entirely comprehensible to both sides (even when those issues were shrouded by rhetoric and symbolic posturing) a significant degree of conceptual misapprehension of each party’s expectations was found. Attempting to breach the

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<sup>95</sup> CB2, 21 September 1824. This refrain from slaves appears often enough in the documents to justify the assumption that slaves understood the basics of the system whereby “White people purchase negroes to work”, (CB1, 20 October 1823). See also, (CB1, 30 March 1821), (CB1, 4 August 1821), (CB2, 10 June 1824), (CB2, 29 March 1825), (CB2, 29 August 1825).

conceptual gap was the Fiscal. Alas he, a plantation and slave owner, predictably understood one side of the argument very much better than the other. Whatever his bias may have been, however, most disputes which could not be settled by compromise within the plantation came to the attention of the Fiscal's or Protector's office. There were two principal ways we can learn about disputes between managers and slaves in Berbice during this period, and thus learn about the issues which primarily troubled each group. The first and most direct is through the complaint process, where slaves, and in some cases managers, instituted a legal action to settle a dispute before the Fiscal or the Protector of Slaves. Such actions generated recorded testimonies which we can use to contextualise the detailed social, economic and political circumstances surrounding the dispute and the parties involved. The second way is through the evidence provided in the plantation punishment record books, where the recorded offences directly indicate the major concerns of a particular manager on his plantation and can indirectly reveal the behaviour of slaves by their actions leading up to punishment.

Work related issues dominate the records. By categorising both slave complaints and slave offences as either socially oriented or work oriented their relative importance becomes clear. Some behaviours are difficult to categorise, and these have been described as 'intermediate', and could, depending on the circumstances, fall into either camp. For example, theft could be regarded as a social offence if the slave was stealing something to resolve a social problem, or if he or she regarded the action as a just payment for work, as in the case of Prudence's

husband discussed in Chapter Four.<sup>96</sup> Theft was punished even when it was theft by one slave from another, a clear example of a socially related offence. The data will be examined both quantitatively and qualitatively. This is particularly appropriate for offences punished by managers, as nearly all offences were punished, and by using an index of punishment severity, we can determine both a quantitative and qualitative rate for each offence.<sup>97</sup> A similar value system can be given to the complaint record, though with less authority. There are fewer complaints and no direct qualitative analysis can be applied as it can for the punishment record. It is possible, however, to give some idea of the official position of such matters by examining how particular issues were treated by the officials involved.

As mentioned in Chapter One, each complaint action brought before the Fiscal could involve several slaves, each expressing several grievances. Each action in the records has been categorised to determine the primary focus of the action, though many actions involved several grievances some of which were socially related and some work related. In Table 2.1 the complaints of slaves made to the Fiscal have been categorised to differentiate the primary thrust of the actions brought by slaves against managers.<sup>98</sup> Those actions not deemed to be primarily work related are categorised as socially related.

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<sup>96</sup> CB2 18 February 1825.

<sup>97</sup> See appendix for detailed explanation of severity weighting.

<sup>98</sup> To determine the focus the context and expression of the complainants in each case was assessed.



TABLE 2.1:  
WORK RELATED COMPLAINT ACTIONS BY SLAVES 1819-1827.<sup>99</sup>

	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Work related actions	206	61%
Plaintiffs involved	592	77%
Social actions	131	39%
Plaintiffs involved	276	23%
Total actions	336	100%
Total plaintiffs involved	768	100%

From the table it is clear that the principal focus for a majority of the actions concerned work, accounting for over 60 percent of actions, and involving 77 percent of the plaintiffs. With a higher rate of plaintiffs than actions, we can also conclude that work related actions involved, on average, more plaintiffs per action than socially related actions, and hence, that work related concerns were more likely to be concerns which were shared by other slaves.

It is important to distinguish between complaint actions and grievances. Each action may incorporate several slaves each bringing several grievances. Such grievances were often treated separately by the Fiscal. Actions have been categorised as either work related or socially related according to the primary thrust of the grievances expressed within the action. In Table 2.2 the total number of grievances expressed in complaint actions by all plaintiffs has been listed, and these figures predictably confirm those from the complaint actions, with 70 percent of grievances being work related.

<sup>99</sup> Data assembled from CB1, CB2, CB3, January 1819 to August 1827.

TABLE 2.2:  
WORK RELATED GRIEVANCES EXPRESSED BY SLAVES 1819-1827.<sup>100</sup>

	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Work related grievances	1340	70%
Total grievances	1924	100%

In Table 2.3 the figures for slave complaints have been sorted by plantation to determine the distribution of work complaints among the slave population in the colony. Plantations with no work complaints, or with only individual work complaints, account for workplaces with more than 65 percent of the slave population. Complaints expressed by a single plaintiff were almost always idiosyncratic, and were not usually complaints shared by other slaves in the workplace. This was also true, albeit much less commonly, for some complaint actions involving more than one plaintiff. For ease of computation, however, those with single complainants are deemed non representative, and those with more than one are deemed representative. This covers a nine year period and hence, as mentioned earlier, demonstrates that most slaves worked on plantations with few work related disputes that could not be settled within the plantation community.

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<sup>100</sup> Data assembled from CB1, CB2, CB3, January 1819 to August 1827.

TABLE 2.3:  
PLANTATIONS WITH WORK RELATED COMPLAINTS (1819-1827).<sup>101</sup>

	<i>No. Plantations</i>	<i>No. Slaves</i>
All plantations (in January 1827)	142	19322
Plantations with no work complaints	79	8764
Percentage of total	56%	45%
Plantations with only single work complainants	26	3776
Percentage of total	18%	20%
Plantations with no collective work complaints	105	12540
Percentage of total	74%	65%
Plantations with work complaints involving 2 complainants	6	1364
Percentage of total	4%	7%
Plantations with work complaints involving more than 2 complainants	31	5418
Percentage of total	22%	28%

From the managers' perspective, work occupied an even greater percentage of their concerns. Actions deemed to constitute an 'offence' by a manager can be said to represent both that particular manager's concerns as well as the concerns that that particular manager felt he had to address on behalf of society or his employers. Examining the punishment record books kept by all the managers in the colony reveals that concerns over work related issues received greater an even greater emphasis from managers than they did from slaves.

<sup>101</sup> Data assembled from CB1, CB2, CB3, January 1819 to August 1827.

TABLE 2.4:  
WORK RELATED OFFENCES EXPRESSED BY MANAGERS (1826-1827).<sup>102</sup>

	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Work related offences	5,335	76.9%
Intermediate offences	962	13.9%
Social offences	632	9.2%
Total offences	6,936	100%
Not translated or unknown	293	
No offences recorded	33	
Total all records	7,262	

To illustrate the predominance of work related offences, Table 2.5 shows a complete breakdown of work related offences punished by managers. The relative seriousness of each type of offence, however, yields a slightly different emphasis, and the table also shows the average severity of punishment meted out to those particular offences, with 1 being the least severe punishment and 5 the highest. When particular sorts of offences occurred repeatedly, this usually indicated the issues which constituted points of confrontation over work conditions and practices.

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<sup>102</sup> Data assembled from PB1, November 1826 to June 1827.

TABLE 2.5  
NUMBER AND PUNISHMENT SEVERITY FOR WORK RELATED & INTERMEDIATE  
OFFENCES (1826-1827).<sup>103</sup>

<i>Offence</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Low Severity</i>	<i>High Severity</i>
Industrial sabotage, gross neglect	159		2.11
Refusal to work	550		2.05
Neglect of duty, bad work	1354	1.55	
Unsatisfactory productivity, laziness	2484	1.40	
Disorderly or drunk at work	171	1.95	
Lateness, absence	617	1.56	
Absconding, extended absence	76		2.59
Encouraging others to disobey orders	21		2.67
Insolence, disobedience, assault, management	486	1.97	
Driver not co-operating	57		2.09
Resisting punishment	39		2.05
Theft & related offences	239		2.46
Making complaint without cause	33		3.27
Encouraging others to abscond, harbouring	11		2.18

Certain intermediate offences, whilst quite rarely perpetrated, were considered by managers to require exemplary punishment. At the top of the list was making a complaint without cause,<sup>104</sup> and this surely indicates that complaints made by slaves to the authorities was particularly aggravating to managers, and was punished more severely than industrial sabotage<sup>105</sup> or even attempted murder and grievous bodily harm.<sup>106</sup> The offence attracting the lightest average punishment was for the most common offence, unsatisfactory productivity,<sup>107</sup> and the second lightest punishment given for the second most common offence, neglect of duty.<sup>108</sup>

<sup>103</sup> Data assembled from PB1, November 1826 to June 1827.

<sup>104</sup> For example, Cadet for "leaving the estate without a pass and going to complain to Mr. Van Stalst in Canje without any cause", (PB1 De Standvastigheid, De 2 May 1826).

<sup>105</sup> For example, Jacob for "allowing the river punt to swamp at the canal mouth with a load of staves", (PB1, Culcarin 20 January 1827).

<sup>106</sup> For example, Venus punished for, "biting off a piece of the ear of the woman Flora in a scuffle", (PB1, Denticchem 8 April 1827).

<sup>107</sup> For example, 10 female slaves punished for "cleaning only 70 Coffee trees", (PB1, Den Arend 1 January 1927).

<sup>108</sup> For example, Thomas punished for "habitual neglect of duty for the last two weeks in picking coffee", (PB1, De Resolutie 19 May 1827).

Collectively, work related offences attracted a well below average severity of punishment. This could be attributable to several factors, including the fact that oft repeated offences would be difficult to deal with in any way other than summarily, with greater attention going to the more dramatic and less common offences. Of the work related offences, the offence of industrial sabotage unremarkably attracted the severest punishment, with refusal to work<sup>109</sup> a close second. Refusal to work was the only common offence (those with more than 500 instances) to attract a punishment severity rating above 2.

While the punishment record reveals primarily managerial concerns, the complaint record shifts the focus to the slave. As shown in Table 2.2 the overwhelming majority of complaints revolved around issues of work. Table 2.6 breaks down the grievance data and illustrates where the concerns were concentrated.

TABLE 2.6:  
NUMBERS OF WORK GRIEVANCES EXPRESSED BY SLAVES (1819-1827).<sup>110</sup>

<i>Grievance</i>	<i>Number</i>
Clothing Allowance	107
Food Allowance	203
Money Owed	20
Work time	305
Work load	209
Vocational dispute	89
Housing problems	4
Economic interference	67
Health problems	114
Childcare problems	27
Unjust punishment work related	192
Other work related issues	3

<sup>109</sup> For example, Caroline who was “ordered to go to Corantyne to pick cotton & refused to do so”, (PB1 Best Coffee Land 12 December 1826).

<sup>110</sup> Data assembled from CB1, CB2, CB3, January 1819 to August 1827.

From Table 2.6 we find that workload and work time were the principle grievances expressed by slaves, ranked 1 and 2 on the list. Close behind were issues related to allowances, with some 330 grievances expressed.<sup>111</sup> Work time and workload were intimately related and could be considered jointly as overwork and together accounted for some 514 grievances, well over a quarter of all slave grievances.<sup>112</sup> Quite often, these particular grievances related to task work, and the complaint involved a dispute over the amount of work that was required and the amount of time it took to do such work. From the records, however, no clear cut evidence exists to establish a preference by slaves for either task work or hourly work. While some workers would complain of task work,<sup>113</sup> at other times slaves complained “that [the manager] will not give task-work”,<sup>114</sup> and still others “begged that task work might be continued”.<sup>115</sup> Slaves complained about either system when it impinged too greatly on their own time and energy or did not suit their temperament. The official position on task work, however, was very clear. As numerous cases attest, the Fiscal would often examine tasks slaves complained of to determine if they were more than the usual on other plantations.<sup>116</sup> In one case the Protector decided it should be “left to the choice of the negroes whether they would be employed by task or otherwise”.<sup>117</sup> For many, task work offered opportunities of diminishing their time at

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<sup>111</sup> Allowances formed part of a complex value system created by slaves and will be examined in detail in Chapter 7 under Materialism.

<sup>112</sup> The figures are 514 grievances for these two categories, representing 27% of all grievances. These also scored very high representative status, with 94% work-time grievances (ECT) involving 3 or more plaintiffs, and 80% of work-load grievances (ECW) involving 3 or more plaintiffs, (CB1, CB2, CB3, January 1819 To August 1827).

<sup>113</sup> As slaves had on many other occasions, for example on Sandvoort where slaves stated that they were “willing to work, but not in a task-gang”, (CB1, 22 January 1821).

<sup>114</sup> CB1, 21 October 1823.

<sup>115</sup> CB3, 9 February 1827

<sup>116</sup> See for example, (CB1, 13 March 1829), (CB1, 15 March 1819), (CB2, 28 October 1824).

<sup>117</sup> CB3, 2 January 1827.

work, so the amount of work required in a particular task was critical to worker/management negotiation. This negotiation could become the focus of disputes over what was to be included in a particular task. For example Hercules on plantation Karel and Willem's Hoop protested to the manager F. H. DeQuay that the agreed task of sawing some logs of wood did not include carrying the planks back to the logie. He was subsequently punished and so brought a complaint to the Fiscal.

DeQuay outlined the events:

complainant and several others were put to saw logs of wood (the task was that two was to saw one log in a day and a half) they begun to saw in the morning at six with their eleven o'clock after they turned out some sawed till three others till four others till five (this account complainant himself states) that they had finished their task in good time and after completing their work he the manager directed them to take the plank from the saw pit to the logie a distance of about 40 to 50 yards. This complainant objected to, as an infringement. He the manager told them this work was considered as part of the task, upon which he begun to be very insolent the consequence was he directed him to receive twelve lashes which was done.<sup>118</sup>

There was no dispute over the facts of the case, the only point which was in dispute was whether the manager was right to expect the transportation of the planks to have been included in the task of sawing the planks. The Fiscal asked Hercules whether the issue of what was included in the task was indeed the crux of the matter:

The complainant being asked if the carrying of plank was the additional labour he replied yes. And on being further asked if any of the other seven negroes were flogged he said no. Did they carry the plank? Yes, and that all of them finished work at five. Result: The Fiscal explained to the complainant that the removing of the plank to the logie appeared to him to be part of the task, particularly as by his own account the distance was not great. Directed him for the future to obey this order as the other negroes did and herewith dismissed the complaint.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> CB2, 21 December 1824.

<sup>119</sup> CB2, 21 December 1824.



The task was reckoned by the manager to occupy a day and half, but all the workers had completed the task before the end of the first day, a saving to the workers of at least a half day of work time. Nevertheless, the issue of carrying the planks was felt to be an important one by Hercules, who perhaps feared some kind of precedent being set which could affect future tasks. The interesting feature of the case is that, though the extra time and labour involved to ‘complete’ their task was modest, Hercules was still sufficiently aggrieved to refuse to do the work and even to become abusive to the manager. Furthermore, he was sufficiently aggrieved to make a formal complaint to the Fiscal. This highlights the detailed nature of the negotiations conducted over the operation of task work and the limitations on the power of managers to extract as much work as they liked from their workers. Even small increments of work expected from negotiated tasks could be fiercely resisted by workers.

Reducing the workload expected from workers was not always conducted in an open or official way. Informal methods of diminishing the tasks expected were certainly explored by many workers. One informal method involved task cheating. For example Hanover, Boatswain, and Evan<sup>120</sup>, were caught (by the night watchman) “hiding & throwing away in the bush some of the wood they were ordered to carry”. They did this “at night after the others had left”, purportedly to reduce their task during the following day. More common was the action of London on plantation Litchfield who was punished for “having been discovered having his

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<sup>120</sup> Evan<sup>2</sup> indicates that more than one Evan lived on the estate. The use of this type of identification by management has been useful to distinguish individual slaves with the same name. Slaves were also distinguished by other ways: by vocation such as “Richard, a cooper” (PB1, Adelphi 28 November 1826); or status such as “Mark creole” (PB1, Balthayock 10 January 1827); or age such as “Claartje klein” (little) and “Claartje groot” (big), (PB1, Nieuw Vigilantie 21 April 1827); more rarely some slaves had two names like “John Punch” (PB1, Kendalls 6 March 1827).

cotton wet so as to make it heavy”.<sup>121</sup> Similarly, McDonald and Wood on plantation Golden Fleece were punished for “burying seed” in their “ginned cotton”,<sup>122</sup> and not to be outdone, Lancaster, also on Golden Fleece, was caught “weighing a brick with his cotton”.<sup>123</sup> These were instances where the manager had caught the worker cheating, and it would be safe to assume many more workers would not have been detected. The problem for slaves as a whole in task cheating would have been the risk of establishing artificially high expectations of work by managers. For example if slaves regularly completed a task early, then the manager might conclude that the task was too slight, and then increase it.

The subtle negotiations over work between workers and management would rarely come to the attention of officials through the complaint records, but they could find their way into the plantation punishment record books. Repeated refusals to work, or consistent under production would have worn away at a manager’s ability to increase workloads. It would have been in the workers’ best interest to maintain a persistent sense of overwork in the mind of the manager to insure that, while he may not decrease the existing work expectation, he would be reluctant to increase it. But this confrontational resistance was not likely to have been necessary on most workplaces. As will be shown later in this chapter, only a small number of plantations recorded either high levels of punishment for work offences or high rates of complaint for work related grievances, and thus it is most likely that the other plantations had negotiated work conditions that managers and workers were both prepared to live with. This was in the best interests of both worker and manager, as

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<sup>121</sup> PB1, Litchfield 2 January 1827.

<sup>122</sup> PB1, Golden Fleece 27 January 1827.

<sup>123</sup> PB1, Golden Fleece 26 January 1827

even modest workloads that needed the constant effort and stress of resistance would have been taxing on both worker and manager.

### **Outcomes of work disputes**

Of the 1,924 grievances expressed by slaves in the nine year period, the Fiscal and the Protector of Slaves recorded results for 1,261, from which 374, or 30 percent, were officially upheld and the defendant punished or admonished. But this was not the only way a slave could have derived satisfaction from the complaint process. As discussed previously, any result where the slave was not punished could be seen as representing some measure of success for the slave, as all complaints imposed costs and aggravation on managers and owners. To understand how slaves may have viewed the complaint process, and to understand what considerations they took into account when they thought of bringing a complaint, it would be useful to somehow measure the overall outcome of slave complaints from the perspective of the slave. It would be easy to argue that slaves who did not have their complaint upheld had somehow lost from the process. But as the complaint process constituted one of the most significant bargaining chips for slaves to negotiate the conditions of their enslavement, we must try to understand the outcome from this perspective. Thus, if a complaint brought by a slave represented a significant disturbance to the manager, then a form of positive outcome had occurred for the slave even before the Fiscal or the Protector handed down a decision. In cases where the slave was punished for proffering a groundless complaint, both defendant and complainant could be seen to have lost from the process.

On the other hand, individuals, both complainants and defendants, would have had different expectations of the complaint process and would have responded differently to the official outcome. To assess the overall outcomes of the complaint records, therefore, I have tried to strike a compromise between these two considerations. Outcomes of the complaint process have been given a 'score' which hopefully provides us with enough information about general attitudes to various issues to make meaningful comments about them. As with the scoring system used to grade the severity of punishment (Table 2.5), a low score reflects more positive aspects and a high score more negative aspects. Thus, as shown in Table 2.7, a complaint which resulted in the case being upheld, or referred to the courts for a crown prosecution against the defendant, scores 1, while a complainant whose complaint was judged frivolous, and was subsequently punished with a flogging, scores 5.

With so little to gain from the complaint process, a favourable outcome for managers and owners would have been quite rare. Even in cases where the slaves were punished represented pyrrhic victories for management; the 'winner' having to pay the Fiscal for the punishment, as well as for handling the complaint, not to mention the loss of labour, time, and effort wasted during the proceedings. The negative aspects and costs of the complaint process were high for managers. Consequently the scoring system used to gauge outcomes for managers gives a low score to those complaints which resulted in a punishment for the slave and an affirmation of managerial authority, and a high score reflects more negative outcomes for the manager. The scoring system is represented in the following Table 2.7:

TABLE 2.7:  
SCORING SYSTEM FOR COMPLAINT ACTION OUTCOMES.

<i>Complainant</i>	<i>Code</i>	<i>Score</i>
Complainant Punished with Whip	CR5	5
Complainant Punished	CR4	4
Complainant Admonished	CR3	3
Complaint Dismissed	CR2	2
Complaint Upheld or referred for prosecution	CR1	1
No Result Recorded	CR0	0
<i>Defendant</i>		
Defendant Punished	DR5	5
Defence rejected and complaint upheld / defendant admonished	DR4	4
Defence upheld but case dismissed	DR3	3
Defence upheld and complainant admonished	DR2	2
Defence upheld and complainant punished	DR1	1
No Result Recorded	DR0	0

From the figures illustrated in the following Table 2.8, we find that among grievances for which results were recorded slaves enjoyed a surprising level of success in work disputes. These figures represent too the recognition of those grievances by the officials of the colony, a recognition which could be expected to affect managerial behaviour and work practices throughout the colony. Remember, as in golf, the lower the score, the better the outcome has been for the party concerned. Remember too that these figures are compiled from all cases for which information is available, and that they indicate the trends and patterns of complaint outcomes and that there will almost always be certain cases which do not follow those patterns.

TABLE 2.8:  
OUTCOMES OF WORK RELATED COMPLAINT ACTIONS (1819-1827).<sup>124</sup>

<i>Grievance</i>	<i>Outcome for Complainant</i>	<i>Outcome for Defendant</i>
Clothing Allowance	2.14	3.16
Food Allowance	2.19	3.04
Money Owed	1.46	3.62
Work time	2.54	2.81
Work load	3.18	2.11
Vocational dispute	3.91	1.74
Housing problems	2.33	4.00
Economic interference	1.54	3.86
Health problems	2.59	2.61
Childcare problems	2.00	3.00
Unjust punishment work related	2.82	2.66
Other work related issues	3.00	2.50

The two columns in the table predictably ‘mirror’ each other for most categories, with a low (more positive) score for one party complemented by a high (more negative) score for the other.<sup>125</sup> In work related actions slaves had the greatest success with complaints dealing with allowances, their quarters, and most especially with complaints of interference in their private economic activity.<sup>126</sup> These results could be interpreted as an affirmation by the authorities of a slave system which allowed slaves to share in the benefits of plantation agriculture sufficiently to gain their compliance. Some historians might interpret the private economic activity of slaves as being little more than an adjunctive aspect of the slave system, rather than a negotiated, and therefore, integral part of the system. Based on the evidence of the

<sup>124</sup> Data assembled from CB1, CB2, CB3, January 1819 to August 1827.

<sup>125</sup> Note however, the modest positive result for both slave and defendant in cases over work time, due to the spread of outcomes in relation to their weighting.

<sup>126</sup> Typically where managers attempted to interfere with the slave’s personal pursuit of money, as in the first recorded complaint (CB1 1 February 1819) where the slaves complained that their mistress, Mrs. Saunders, had stopped their allowance which they had been using to feed their hogs. In other cases managerial interference constituted the grounds of the complaint, such as the case of Rossetta on plantation Beerenstein who complained that though the manager, Mr. Deussen, kept “a considerable quantity of stock” he did not allow the slaves to do so, “killing whatever he finds” (CB1 15 November 1820).

slaves in Berbice, and their reactions to conditions they deemed unacceptable, such negotiated arrangements were crucial to the survival of the slave system in that colony.

Conversely, the negotiated expectation of managers and plantation owners was that slaves performed a certain amount of work, and work of the manager's choosing. To this end it is not surprising that slaves got little joy from the Fiscal in disputes over workloads or in grievances about vocational issues. Work time grievance outcomes were more likely to affect slaves' ability to work on their own behalf, particularly on Sunday. Thus, most successful prosecutions by slaves over issues of work time centred on working on Sunday, while most successful defences were in cases which involved long daily working hours. Overall, slaves did marginally better out of worktime grievances than did the managers.

Slaves persistently forwarded complaints when they found that work conditions had deteriorated, and it is possible that they became less tolerant of negative changes over time. This trend is reflected in the number of complaints recorded for each year. Table 2.9 lists the complaint actions in each year for which records exist.

TABLE 2.9:  
COMPLAINT ACTIONS BY YEAR, TYPE & NUMBER OF COMPLAINANTS PER ACTION  
(1819-1827).<sup>127</sup>

<i>Year &gt;</i>	<i>1819</i>	<i>1820</i>	<i>1821</i>	<i>1822</i>	<i>1823</i>	<i>1824</i>	<i>1825</i>	<i>1826</i>	<i>1827</i>	<i>All Years</i>
Work related action	15	13	26	24	34	17	35	9	33	206
Total plaintiffs involved	49	27	79	98	77	53	127	9	73	592
Average plaintiffs per action.	3.27	2.08	3.04	4.08	2.26	3.12	3.63	1.00	2.21	2.87
Social related action	12	12	16	8	9	13	18	5	38	131
Total plaintiffs involved	14	12	32	8	12	32	19	5	42	176
Average plaintiffs per action.	1.17	1.00	2.00	1.00	1.33	2.46	1.06	1.00	1.11	1.34
Total Actions	27	25	42	32	43	30	53	14	71	337
Total plaintiffs involved	63	39	111	106	89	85	146	14	115	768
Average plaintiffs per action.	2.33	1.56	2.64	3.31	2.07	2.83	2.75	1.00	1.62	2.28

With outcome results generally favourable for slaves bringing complaints with predominantly work related grievances, the continued use of the complaint process by slaves, despite the risks of occasional punishment, is understandable. While slaves could be punished for making a complaint to the Fiscal once back on the plantation, this was not generally the case and never when the complaint was in any way upheld. Slaves were occasionally punished by their plantation managers for making groundless complaints to officials other than the Fiscal, such as local magistrates, but the figure given in Table 2.5 includes complaints made to attorneys and so the number of slaves punished by managers for making groundless complaints to the Fiscal would have been relatively low. Nevertheless the risk was certainly there, as quite often the Fiscal would punish slaves bringing what the Fiscal considered to be false complaints.

The impact of the complaint process on the slave system in Berbice should not be underestimated. It provided slaves with considerable leverage and helped to

<sup>127</sup> Data assembled from CB1, CB2, CB3, January 1819 to August 1827. Note the complaint record for the year 1826 is incomplete.



balance the power of the manager within slave/manager negotiations. Though it is probable that a manager felt vindicated in cases where the slave was roundly punished by the Fiscal, it is questionable if this was sufficient in most cases to assuage the loss of time, production, money, and the subtle but nonetheless potent loss of prestige attributed to managers unable to control their slaves. As will be shown later in this chapter, managers who attracted work related complaints were not common, with only a minority ever being complained of by slaves.

### **Collective work issues**

Collective actions recorded in the complaint records were those which were either brought by a small number of complainants on behalf of a larger group, or those which involved three or more complainants in the action. As quantifying intent is problematic, collective actions will be defined as those that involved three or more complainants. Actions involving single complainants will be considered non-representative or idiosyncratic, while those involving two complainants will be deemed intermediate. Similarly, indirect collective actions gleaned from the punishment records were those where three or more persons were involved in the offence.

It might be argued that slaves did not take enough advantage of the complaint process to take more widespread collective actions involving far more of the workers at a particular workplace. But as Dennis Chong points out, while “earlier group theories [assumed] ... that individuals will naturally take action that is in their collective interest” rational choice theory implies that many individuals will refrain

from taking such action because they “can potentially receive the benefits ... without paying for them”.<sup>128</sup> This was particularly so for slaves, where actions could not only have positive or neutral results, but also negative ones. For individual slaves the best strategy may well have been to offer little more than moral support to those brave enough to take an action which could benefit the whole plantation, without direct involvement. If the action was successful they would benefit equally with those who had taken the action, but if not, only those involved in the action would bear the cost of punishment. It is possible that such behaviour, common to all rational beings, played into the hands of the slave owners. Individual protesters could be isolated and punished, thus deterring other slaves from taking part in such actions. But the reverse also holds. Slaves did take part in collective actions and these actions tended to be those most likely to benefit the group as a whole rather than a few individuals. Collective actions rarely involved more than a small percentage of the slaves on a plantation, raising the possibility that representative actions could be optimally constructed to both minimise exposure to punishment, while at the same time maximising the impact the action had on managers and officials. In these cases the direct outcome for the handful of slaves involved was less important than the overall effect that such action had on future actions by managers. While a manager who emerged victorious from the Fiscal's office may have felt vindicated, he may nevertheless have been careful not to provoke such protest in the future by similar behaviour. Slaves were not easily deterred by failed protest actions, nor did continual punishment abate their work protests within plantations when issues such as task requirements were being negotiated. Slaves often persisted with complaints

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<sup>128</sup> Dennis Chong, *Rational Lives*.

or plantation offences when their concerns were completely ignored by managers and officials. Collective actions were the most effective means that slaves had for influencing their overall work conditions. These actions could encompass a wide range of work and social grievances.

TABLE 2.10:  
COLLECTIVE COMPLAINT GRIEVANCES (1819-1827).<sup>129</sup>

	<i>Grievance Group</i>											
	Total	T%	EA	EA%	EC	EC%	SP	SP%	SF	SF%	SD	SD%
One complainant	473	25%	64	19%	211	21%	139	31%	38	36%	21	91%
Two complainants	125	6%	16	5%	54	5%	46	10%	7	7%	2	9%
More than two complainants	1326	69%	250	76%	745	74%	269	59%	62	58%	0	0%
Total	1924		330		1010		454		107		23	

In the above Table 2.10 we find that a clear relationship exists between the number of complainants and the type of grievance being expressed. Work related grievances (EA and EC) which attracted three or more complainants to participate in the action accounted for 76 percent and 74 percent respectively. This compares with just 59 percent and 58 percent for socially related grievances (SP and SF). While considerable variation exists within these figures, the overall trend cannot be ignored, and is clear evidence that work related grievances were more likely to have been shared by others than socially related grievances. In this way, work related grievances were more likely to have been part of 'collective' disputes than socially related grievances.

<sup>129</sup> Data assembled from CB1, CB2, CB3, January 1819 to August 1827. LEGEND: EA= Work allowances, EC= Work conditions, SP= Socially related (personal), SF= Socially related (family and communal), SD= Civil dispute.

In the following Table 2.11 offences committed by slaves on plantations have been categorised to indicate the number of slaves involved in the particular offence. The assumption is that slaves who ‘collectively’ commit an offence have a greater likelihood of demonstrating behaviour which could be interpreted as a collective dispute with the manager.

TABLE 2.11:  
COLLECTIVE ACTIONS EXPRESSED AS OFFENCES (1826-1827).<sup>130</sup>

	<i>Offence Type</i>							
	Total	T%	Work	Work%	Int.	Int.%	Social	Social%
One involved in offence	2781	39%	1663	31%	680	73%	352	56%
Two involved	1202	17%	897	17%	137	15%	162	26%
More than two involved	3167	44%	2734	52%	113	12%	115	18%
Total (excludes unknown)	7150	100%	5294	100%	930	100%	629	100%

The correlation between the number of culprits and the type of dispute in Table 2.11 is even more apparent than that shown in Table 2.10. Work related offences typically involved three or more workers, with 52 percent for this category compared to just 31 percent for work offences committed by an individual. In contrast, offences of a more social nature were typically committed by an individual, with 56 percent of such grievances and only 18 percent involving three or more persons. Intermediate offences, which often involved more serious or even criminal activity, were even more idiosyncratic.

Collective disputes were likely to be those most feared by management and the colonial officials. They had the potential to spiral out of control, so managers were especially careful in such circumstances. The collective dispute on Herstelling

<sup>130</sup> Data assembled from PB1, November 1826 to June 1827. As discussed previously indirect actions by slaves can be reflected in the punishment returns when groups of slaves ‘collectively’ disobey particular rules on plantations.

provides an excellent example of how such disputes could get out of control. Here the conditions experienced by the slaves were such that a large number of them considered abandoning the slave system altogether. The action also illustrates that such complaints, by large groups of slaves, were commonly the result of long standing dissatisfaction among the workers on a particular plantation. Robert Kennedy, the manager of Herstelling, had for some time been treading a fine line between his drive for increased productivity and the need to maintain slave co-operation to keep a plantation working effectively. It would seem that a previous manager on plantation Herstelling had been dismissed after being warned following a complaint against that manager by 15 workers.<sup>131</sup> A good manager would have taken heed of the precedent but Kennedy did not. A good manager would also have been aware of the rising discontent among the workers and would have adjusted his style accordingly. Instead Kennedy believed he “had no reason to suspect that the negroes considered themselves aggrieved”.<sup>132</sup> Ignorance of the workers’ mood was always dangerous, but on this occasion it was very nearly disastrous, both for the manager and the plantation owners. Mass action by slaves, regardless of the circumstances, carried with it the fear of a nascent uprising, and the colonial administrators believed that all such actions had to be treated very seriously.

Plantation Herstelling had 187 slaves in residence,<sup>133</sup> but on Friday morning, 8 April 1825, Samson, the head driver, quickly saw that the gang was much depleted. He went to inform the manager, who was “much surprised ... to learn from the driver

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<sup>131</sup> The attorney in that case stated that “if the negroes had cause to complain again, he [the manager] would be immediately discharged” (CB1, 12 July 1822), Kennedy is first mentioned in the records as manager of Herstelling in April 1825 and was still working as manager on the estate through to 1827, (CB2 14 April 1825 & PB1, Herstelling).

<sup>132</sup> CB2, 14 April 1825.

<sup>133</sup> PB1, Herstelling.

that thirty four<sup>134</sup> negroes had absconded". At first Kennedy thought that "they had gone to town [to complain] and therefore I went to the attorney immediately & informed them of the circumstance".<sup>135</sup> According to Begin, one of the strikers, this had been their original plan: "we wanted to take the wood punt to town to complain, but the manager took it and had it chained".<sup>136</sup> The manager denied this:

With respect to the statement that the punts were chained and that they could not come to town, it is false. The larger river punt has a chain, cable and anchor by which she rides, the other punts are fastened with a rope and no chain or lock has ever been on one since I have been here.<sup>137</sup>

Whether or not the slaves had tried to go to town to complain to the Fiscal is difficult to ascertain. The real cause of the complaint and mass walk out is also not immediately obvious. Clearly, however, the gang was much aggrieved. The statements made by the slaves suggest that their grievance centred on the workload demanded by the new manager:

We are treated too hard by the manager. We got too much punished, if we work till eleven we must eat and wash ourselves, if the cook boils plantains we cant get time to eat them. No eleven is given. When we cut canes we must work till night. At night we must work, carry firewood from the trench mouth to the engine till eight o'clock. We then go home. At cock crow we go to the field. Before gun fire we make two casks of sugar a day.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> The records are confusing as to the exact number of slaves who absconded. The Fiscal reports that, "thirty five negroes (14 men and 25 women)", had gone absent, though 14 and 25 clearly make 39. The records then go on to name 37 negroes, while the evidence of the manager's letter to the attorney states that, "twenty women and eleven men" had quitted the estate, (CB2, 14 April 1825).

<sup>135</sup> The fact that Kennedy felt he needed to involve a higher authority emphasizes the 'middle management' status of plantation managers.

<sup>136</sup> CB2, 14 April 1825.

<sup>137</sup> CB2, 14 April 1825.

<sup>138</sup> Testimony of Begin, CB2, 14 April 1825.

Another slave who featured prominently in the strike action was Hussar,<sup>139</sup> and his testimony supported Begin's:

We have no time to eat plantains. We must run out five o'clock and work all day if they ring bell is nothing, we must keep cutting canes, all the gang men and women. ... We are to cut and carry canes to make two Hogsheads. ... [Manager] says we don't work. When we dig trench we have task work, if we finish it, he gives us new one. ... We put the canes in the dam, four of us were directed to work the punts, we worked three times, overseer said all the canes were to come home. I said that is what we complain of, this high work. We have no time to eat or to sleep, overseer went and told the manager who directed him to tell me if all the canes were not brought home he would lick me from my neck to my heels.<sup>140</sup>

Burke, the driver of the women's gang,<sup>141</sup> Daniel the blacksmith, Jeanette and Prince, all described a manager driving the workers to excess. They described also the undue punishments levied on those unable to perform, or who dared to object.<sup>142</sup>

In the case of Herstelling, however, a pretext of overwork could well have covered for a general dissatisfaction with the management of the estate. The evidence of the slave Jesamine strongly suggests that such was the case. Jesamine's testimony differed somewhat from that of her colleagues in that it iterated more candidly how the gang felt about the manager.<sup>143</sup> She began her testimony by discrediting Kennedy's assertion that the slaves had no cause to abscond. "I did not go to the bush for nothing", she says, yet this obvious fact seemed to have eluded the manager and the Fiscal alike. By denying the slaves had any cause to quit the plantation, the manager had implied that they acted irrationally or spontaneously,

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<sup>139</sup> Remember that both Begin and Hussar were thought to be thieves and drunkards by management (PB1, Herstelling).

<sup>140</sup> Testimony of Hussar, CB2, 14 April 1825.

<sup>141</sup> The peculiar place Drivers held in Berbice will be discussed later in Chapter 5, as will Burke and his treatise on going bush.

<sup>142</sup> Burke, Daniel, Jeannette, and Prince all gave evidence in the Fiscal's investigation, (CB2, 14 April 1825).

<sup>143</sup> Even the Fiscal noted that Jesamine was "intelligent", (CB2, 14 April 1825).

without any thought given to their behaviour. After supporting her colleagues on the matter of overwork Jesamine then extended the parameters of the complaint:

The manager cant allow us time to eat, we were employed cutting and carrying canes. ... We are to cut canes to make two Hogsheads a day. It takes us from morning sun rise till night to cut these canes. During the neaps<sup>144</sup> there is no water in the canals and we must drag through the mud, we are employed with three punts all night to bring canes home. We have no eleven o'clock, we do all we can but the manager is never satisfied.<sup>145</sup>

Kennedy consistently rejected the statements made by the slaves, and offered his own version of events preceding the strike:

On Thursday thirty eight were employed cutting and carrying canes and we begun grinding and the canes cut on these two days made four Hogsheads. On the Thursday I had reason to be very much dissatisfied with the punt men, who took four hours to bring the punts from the field where they were cutting canes to the buildings and I therefore had the punt drivers Burke, Bonnis and [illegible] flogged by the driver Emmanuel. The punt could have been brought home in two hours and the field where they were cutting is at most 400 roods from the boiling house. No complaint can exist of want of water in the canals to navigate the punts, for it was spring tides and therefore water which is always first at this estate and constantly used by the negroes to drink and cook with was taken in. On the Thursday afternoon I went into the field and found very few canes cut. I found fault with the driver and told the gang it would not do. Nothing more was said nor was the driver nor any of the field people flogged.<sup>146</sup>

The manager refuted Jesamine's reference to the neap tides by informing the Fiscal that the tides prior to the walk out were spring tides. Yet Jesamine did not say that the tides immediately prior to the strike were neap, only that when the tides *were* neap the workers had to drag the canes through the mud. Jesamine was arguing about a long standing grievance of overwork, but the manager was only concerned with the events immediately prior to their strike, as if once he had extracted the work from the slaves on behalf of his employers, the slaves should have no further interest

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<sup>144</sup> Low tides, significant where land is below sea level as in Berbice.

<sup>145</sup> Testimony of Jesamine, (CB2, 14 April 1825).

<sup>146</sup> CB2, 14 April 1825.



in it. But for Jesamine the manager's action was just one more entry in a catalogue of discontent – one not mitigated by the passing of time, but festered by it. The actions of the slaves thereby indicated that they did not allow adjustments to their workload to pass uncontested.

Kennedy's assumption that only contemporary grievances could possibly warrant or even explain protest actions by slaves is further demonstrated by his statement that none of the slaves were punished on the Thursday, even though he felt justified in doing so, and by the fact that he was genuinely puzzled that his magnanimity provoked not acts of contrition, but acts of rebellion. By outlining the events immediately prior to the strike Kennedy hoped to demonstrate that the slaves had no just reason to quit the estate. He made great issue of what materials and belongings the slaves took with them when they quit the estate, the suggestion being that they had intended to remain in the bush and make a permanent escape, further proof that the work conditions they complained of were a mere pretence, with the real objective having been to escape. This may well have been true, although it is more likely that the slaves had been considering both the options of escape and of making a complaint to the Fiscal. The fact that the slaves had only removed themselves to some abandoned fields nearby, yet took most of their possessions, highlights the indecision. It is probable these alternatives were hotly debated during their time in the back fields. In the end, the vast majority made no further movement towards the bush, nor did they attempt to flee when the militia came for them.<sup>147</sup>

The manager continued his testimony:

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<sup>147</sup> Of all the slaves who quit the estate, only three decided to go into the bush and remain there. The dynamics of the escape are discussed in Chapter 5.

With respect to the eleven o'clock I leave that entirely to the drivers and the negroes when cutting canes. I require canes to make two Hogsheads, to do this 35 negros exclusive of punt men are employed, if they would work they would get plenty of time to get breakfast but if they idle their time away it is their own fault. I say I require 2 Hogsheads a day but by my journal, I lay over to show that they seldom make more than 9 Hogsheads a week. This is task work which I am confident no negroes on any sugar estate in this colony could consider hard work. But the gang on this estate work less than any Negroes I ever know. I flogged the punt driver Burke because on my going into the field I found [that] instead of hurrying the punt he was sitting down on one conversing with the other negroes. To convince the negroes that they had plenty of time to get breakfast if they would work themselves as they ought to do, I went myself with them in the field and remained there with them. I attended to the cutting and carrying at eleven o'clock I directed the driver to crack his whip, on going to the canal where the canes were heaped up I showed him the quantity ready for the works, they then took the usual time to get breakfast but the very next day the same complaint existed, no canes sufficient and consequently no time to break off to get breakfast.<sup>148</sup>

Kennedy had set a task he knew the slaves were capable of performing. He went to the field and personally supervised the slaves and they cut the requisite quantity of cane. But just because an able bodied worker was capable of digging so many roods of trench, or cutting so many bundles of canes, did not mean to say that a worker thought that this amount of work was reasonable for the manager to expect on a continuing basis.

For Kennedy, a simple managerial axiom applied to his workers: If a task was within the capacity of workers to perform, and that task had to be completed prior to their meal break, then if they had no time to eat, "it [was] their own fault". Kennedy believed that the slaves had no time for their meal break because they were lazy, and "work less than any negroes I ever knew", and that this, more than anything, explained their low productivity. Jesamine, however, offered some other

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<sup>148</sup> CB2, 14 April 1825.

explanations.<sup>149</sup> First there was the matter of estate maintenance. Jesamine claimed that “the fields are so covered with vines that that makes it difficult to cut the canes”, and this was supported by the overseer Robert Jones who admitted that on Wednesday “the field had a good many vines in it and much grass”, but said that the fields the gang worked on during Thursday were “in excellent order”. So Jones, despite recognising that some fields were overgrown, thought that because the fields worked by the slaves on Thursday were fine, then they should not have quit the estate on Thursday night. Like his boss, Jones considered that only recent events should be considered pertinent to the case.<sup>150</sup>

Jesamine provided an even more insightful explanation into the cause of both the gang’s low productivity and their general discontent – Kennedy himself. Jesamine claimed that “previous to Mr. Kennedy’s coming to the estate the gang were much stronger than now and we used to make three Hogsheads”.<sup>151</sup> This was considerably more than the two hogsheads a day Kennedy claimed he had a right to expect but could rarely get.<sup>152</sup> As will be shown to be the situation in many disputes between slaves and managers, there is in this case a direct correlation between management style and slave compliance. Although all work-related negotiations between slaves and management were underscored by the constant tension resulting from their different goals, the style and personality of the manager could go a long way toward

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<sup>149</sup> CB2, 14 April 1825.

<sup>150</sup> CB2, 14 April 1825.

<sup>151</sup> As there was no increase over time of the number of slaves on this plantation, it must be assumed that Jesamine used the word ‘strong’ to indicate a higher capacity and/or willingness to work. Although it is possible the slaves were better fed in previous times, that is not supported by the slave’s testimony which failed to mention (as slaves commonly did) that rations had decreased over time. Therefore the most likely explanation is that gang had been previously more willing to work harder or more efficiently, to the extent that they managed nearly twice the output without complaint.

<sup>152</sup> CB2, 14 April 1825.

making the transactions less fraught. At the core of the strike and walk out by this large body of slaves at Herstelling was the pent up discord among the workers concerning the managerial style and character of Robert Kennedy.<sup>153</sup> The approach taken by the workers on Herstelling was confrontational and it was very likely that those involved knew the alarm it would cause.<sup>154</sup> Perhaps they felt that a large and dramatic protest was the best way to rid themselves of the much despised manager. If so, they failed, as the manager remained.<sup>155</sup>

In contrast to Robert Kennedy, and indeed most of the managers, adult slaves, overseers and officials in the colony, C. H. De Jong had no foreign home to long for, no cherished memories of English or African village life, no bonds of blood strung across the cold waters of the Atlantic. Like an increasing number of the colony's inhabitants,<sup>156</sup> he had been born and raised in Berbice. A mulatto, predictably out of a white father and a black mother, he could count himself fortunate: he was free, relatively well paid, and could look forward to a bright future.<sup>157</sup> As the manager of a plantation owned by one of the wealthier local business men,<sup>158</sup> he commanded respect even from whites. So he was not about to jeopardise that position by slack

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<sup>153</sup> See Table 7.9 in Chapter Seven which indicates how different managers effected the punishment regimes on the same plantations.

<sup>154</sup> The testimony of Begin and others reinforces the fact that the slaves did not venture far because they were eager not to be seen as rebellious, though it is probable that this group would have vigorously discussed all the options available while in the field. They also stressed that they carried their cutlasses only because "who can go to the bush without a cutlass" (testimony of Begin and Burke, CB2, 14 April 1825).

<sup>155</sup> Kennedy was still manager 2 years later, and this was not the last complaint against him, another was lodged in 1827 (CB3, 4 April 1827).

<sup>156</sup> By 1825 about half the population of the colony would have likely been 'creole', that is, born in the colony, though most were young. See Table 1.2 in Chapter One.

<sup>157</sup> A year later he was to manage an even larger plantation for Mr. Gallez called Frederick's Lust. Mr. Gallez employed several coloured managers; for example Mr. Bierman on plantation Ithaca (CB2, 5 May 1825), and was married to a free coloured woman (CB3, 10 July 1827).

<sup>158</sup> Mr. Gallez would come to own several plantations and was also involved in woodcutting and trading enterprises.

and improper execution of his managerial responsibilities. He had recently replaced a white man, Mr. Hartman,<sup>159</sup> and he meant to see that no man, white or black, would replace him before his time. He was determined not to disappoint the faith shown in his ability, and yet his success or failure would rest not with his employer, Mr. Gallez, but with his workers, the slaves. It would prove to be a close run thing, for the workers had made up their minds that De Jong, and his insufferable enthusiasm, would have to go.

On 3 March 1825 two slaves, Glasgow and Hercules, brought a complaint of overwork against De Jong to the Fiscal. They complained that the new manager “requires more work from them than they or any of the slaves on the estate can perform”<sup>160</sup>, and that “for the last week the manager has not given them their dram”. Glasgow commented that “in Mr. Hartman’s time they did their work well, but now they could not”. This closely resembles the situation in the previous case where a former manager had been able to get sufficient work from the slaves without rancour. Perhaps what Glasgow meant was that in Hartman’s time they did not mind their work because Hartman had been able to negotiate work conditions better, and did so in a manner which had not rankled the slaves. As figures presented later in this chapter will reveal, a strong correlation existed between work disputes and particular managers, indicating that many disputes over work conditions were in effect particular manifestations of dissatisfaction with a manager.<sup>161</sup>

Significantly, the men on plantation Noordsburg “had no complaint against their master [owner], he is very good but the new manager De Jong treats them ill”.

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<sup>159</sup> CB2, 29 August 1825. Hartman leaves the plantation, and from Gallez’s tone, was most likely dismissed. If he had died the records would customarily prefix his name with ‘the late’.

<sup>160</sup> CB2, 3 March 1825.

<sup>161</sup> See Tables 2.14 and 2.15 later in this chapter.

Hercules emphasised the point by adding that if De Jong remained as manager he wanted to be sold. Unlike Kennedy on Herstelling, De Jong had no illusions as to the mood of the gang, or of his popularity. After going through the details of the work required of the workers on the estate he went on to explain why he believed the two slaves had complained:

The real cause of complaint is there is a great abundance of corn and cassava on the estate. I do not mean in the negro provision fields, but belonging to the estate. Independent of their plantains Mr. Gallez provides the negroes to use this cassava and corn, but I was directed not to allow it to be sold. Mr. Gallez gives the negroes the use of two punts every Sunday to take fuel, of which there is great abundance in the new field, to town to sell. Last Sunday I found 13 large baskets full of corn taken out of the field which they were also going to sell. I took away the corn, but did not prevent the punt or people taking the fire wood, nor did I threaten to punish any of them on account of the corn more than saying I did it by Mr. Gallez's order who would not allow the estate provisions to be sold.<sup>162</sup>

If this explanation by De Jong was correct, in that he was merely following an order of the owner, what could explain the plaintiffs' testimony specifically excluding Mr. Gallez from criticism? It was possible that Hartman overlooked the slave's commercial activities in return for productive work, an arrangement the slaves would have likely found satisfactory. Without the extra cash from trade, however, they were less willing to make the effort to maintain plantation productivity.

In reply to the complaint Gallez argued that the two slaves were not representative of the workforce, and were "bad characters". Glasgow had been punt captain but Gallez "was under the necessity of breaking him".<sup>163</sup> If Gallez was so clearly no friend of the two plaintiffs, what could have motivated their support? One explanation would be that the men would have known that it would be much easier to

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<sup>162</sup> CB2, 3 March 1825.

<sup>163</sup> CB2, 3 March 1825.

change their manager than their owner, and that by demonising the one and lauding the other, they hoped to alienate the manager from Gallez. Additionally, it was the manager they had to live and work with, while the proprietor was probably seen only occasionally. All the two men had wanted was to have a manager like Hartman; they didn't mind cajoling Gallez in the process if it helped their cause, regardless of what they might have really thought about him. It is possible that Gallez had dismissed Hartman for having allowed such commercial activities by the slaves,<sup>164</sup> and thought that he could retain Hartman's productivity while adopting De Jong's parsimony.

Gallez's attempt to dismiss the complaint as being idiosyncratic rather than representative was a common strategy used against complaints brought by just one or two plaintiffs. This position proved groundless, however, when 17 slaves from Noordsburg presented a mass complaint some six months later on 29 August 1825. Glasgow and Hercules were not included in the group taking this new action, but the complaint reinforced many of the points they had made back in March. Once more the slaves stressed that "since we have been purchased by Mr. Gallez we have no cause of complaint against him". More significantly, they once again referred to the previous manager:

Hartman was the first manager master put on the estate, we never complained against him, but now De Jong is our manager we are oppressed by him.<sup>165</sup>

The case differs from the first case presented against De Jong, however, in two ways. First, the complaint was brought by a large group of slaves, and so circumvented the

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<sup>164</sup> Note that De Jong refers in his testimony to a specific order of Gallez's, an order Gallez was likely to have given to Hartman also. The fact that the slaves had continued the practice until De Jong came along indicates that Hartman was unable or unwilling to enforce the order, either circumstance likely to cause dismissal.

<sup>165</sup> CB2, 29 August 1825

‘troublemaker’ label levied against Hercules and Glasgow. Second, the complaint is more specific: that of being required to work on Sundays and of only receiving one bunch of plantains per week as their allowance. Both these would constitute a breach of specific laws in operation in the colony. This breach would have been one the slaves would have been well aware of, and which was pointed out by the Fiscal before his investigation into the complaint began:

... if the charges were borne out by good corroborating and circumstantial evidence that they were both offences against the laws of the land generally and specially against ordinances of council in government of this colony and for a breach of which offences the said court had fined heavy penalties against the transgressors...<sup>166</sup>

The Fiscal thus journeyed to the plantation in order to investigate the complaints fully.<sup>167</sup> The first of the grievances related to working on Sunday, and the plaintiffs made their position clear to the Fiscal:

On Sunday we contend the day should be our own, but we do not get it; early we must bring fire wood, one bundle wood and two bundles of grass – however early we begin to get this fuel and grass we are not better for it, we must take it to the manager’s door where the plantains and fish is put out and we must remain. No one dare go to work his provision fields or do any thing else, the manager would cause immediate punishment to be inflicted, all of us must be present.<sup>168</sup>

The manager disagreed and claimed that all the complaints were “false and groundless in toto” and believed he “will be able fully and satisfactorily [to] prove from the evidence of the overseer and drivers of the estate that they are contrary to truth”. In his testimony he began by telling the Fiscal that he did not loiter away his time on Sunday:

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<sup>166</sup> CB2, 29 August 1825

<sup>167</sup> Thus incurring yet another cost to the plantation proprietor, in addition to the statutory charges for each complainant in an action and each punishment levied, the Fiscal also referred his expenses to the defendants.

<sup>168</sup> CB2, 29 August 1825



I come down the stairs always before six and as soon as I come down  
I either go myself or the overseer applies for the keys to the store to  
take out fish and other rations to be issued.<sup>169</sup>

But the charge was not one of loitering, it was one of requiring work to be done on Sunday. To this charge he stated that “the gang is required to bring a bundle of wood for the kitchen use during the week and two bundles of grass for the proprietor’s horse and mules belonging to the estate, which are employed to grind coffee”.

Neither he nor the Fiscal saw the contradiction in De Jong’s testimony, where his refutation “in toto” of the charge of requiring work to be done on Sunday preceded an outline of the work he required to be done on Sunday. Overlooking this contradiction, the Fiscal ordered for a sample bundle of wood and grass to be brought to him for examination. The issue now became one concerning the difficulty of the tasks required of the slaves on Sunday. The bundle of wood was noted to be easily got because of “a large empolder<sup>170</sup> having been taken in lately”. Similarly the grass was “in great abundance on all estates in the colony from the present seasonable weather”.<sup>171</sup>

The overseer, Mr. E. Holboom, corroborated the manager’s statement and was “ready to testify on oath, that no work is ever required to be done on the estate on Sunday, but bringing the grass and fuel”. The slaves’ statements do not contradict either the manager or the overseer, as they never claimed that they had any other Sunday work besides the getting of wood and grass. Everyone, therefore, agreed that the slaves were required to bring fuel and grass on Sunday, and that these tasks were the only ones required of the slaves. The difference between them lay in the

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<sup>169</sup> CB2, 29 August 1825

<sup>170</sup> A retaining wall made of wood.

<sup>171</sup> CB2, 29 August 1825

interpretation of these tasks. The slaves considered these tasks to be 'work', while management and the Fiscal believed they were not. It would appear that, in the view of managers and officials, the slaves in this case were under the misapprehension that doing easy physical labour for someone else was work, when in fact, these tasks were too easy and trifling to warrant the classification 'work'. In the view of the slaves, as these tasks were for the benefit of the estate, and had to be done at a particular time during a day they considered "should be [their] own", then they constituted work, and such tasks represented an intrusion of work into their private life.<sup>172</sup>

The other of the two breaches of law the Fiscal investigated at Noordsburg was the allowance of plantains. The slaves complained of getting only one bunch of plantains per week. Again the manager's statement began with a flat denial:

I positively say that for the last three weeks each man and woman on the estate has received two bunches of plantains, this they cannot contradict.<sup>173</sup>

The workers were not given the opportunity to contradict and no reply was recorded.

In any case it would hardly have been necessary as the manager went on to say that

previous to the last three weeks it is true they got but one bunch because the plantains got scarce but there are three fields close the buildings and for the last 6 months we have cut but 16 bunches out of it, the reason is they were stolen by the negroes, they generally cut off half the bunch and left the other half, when we expected to find plantains the trees only had ½ bunches.

Again we must assume, for the purposes of this investigation, that only recent events are worthy of consideration by management, as if some kind of statute of limitations

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<sup>172</sup> CB2, 29 August 1825. Just as the slaves on plantation Profit considered "That after having worked the whole week for his master, he thinks that the Sunday belongs to the negroes", (CB1, 6 August 1822).

<sup>173</sup> CB2, 29 August 1825

existed for slave grievances. Perhaps the manager felt that as the problem no longer existed, then the grievance about short allowances had already been addressed. Moreover, by blaming the slaves for the shortfall in the first case, he no doubt hoped to deflect any criticism from the Fiscal. Nevertheless, the inadequate allowances were never made good and therefore constituted a breach of established rules on allowances.

Explaining these twists in logic and comprehension, which would seem to challenge even the power of hindsight to overcome, is made easier if the entire case is viewed as an allegorical confrontation, albeit one with real causes and consequences. Manager, Fiscal and slaves all knew that the case was not significantly concerned with the technical legalities of Sunday work or the allowance of plantains. The manager believed the basis of the complaint to have been a compendium of several unspoken, and in his view unjustified, grievances. The first, mentioned earlier, was his interference in the slaves' commercial traffic of surplus produce belonging to the estate. The second concerned the activities of the slaves in their off duty hours. He informed the Fiscal that many of the men "rove about at night" and "come home drunk" and that he found these habits "next to impossible" to prevent.<sup>174</sup> By insisting that they bring wood and grass on Sunday morning, and also by insisting that their allowances only be given out in person on Sunday morning, he forced the slaves to be present on the estate on Sunday morning. But the manager claimed that his only reason for each of these two requirements was to ensure that all the slaves were present on the estate on Sunday mornings. This does not explain why both conditions seem to have been required. The task of bringing wood and

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<sup>174</sup> CB2, 29 August 1825

grass must surely, at the very least, serve twin purposes – that of extracting some extra work from the slaves, while at the same time serving to exert a measure of control over their private lives.

The third explanation the manager provided for the slaves' complaints had to do with an allowance of rum. This issue was the proximate cause of the slaves' complaint, according to the manager, and was thus central to their discontent. The slaves were in the habit of getting a dram of rum at the end of each working day so long as they returned from their work with a "full basket".<sup>175</sup> Unfortunately, said De Jong, he ran out of rum<sup>176</sup>, and so attempted to substitute the rum 'bonus'<sup>177</sup> with fish. The manager informed the Fiscal of the reaction by the gang:

I told them I could not give as the rum was done, they became rather troublesome and I then said they should not have it, this gave great offence and Gallant spoke loud saying 'if all the men stood like him he would take care that I should be obliged to give them the rum and it should not depend on me'. They took their [food] allowance next morning and they went to complain.<sup>178</sup>

Again a manager made a temporal connection to slave unrest - a dram denied one day, an official complaint the next. No connection was made between this and the earlier complaint of Hercules and Glasgow, despite the similarities and the obvious dislike of the manager by the gang. Nevertheless, the Fiscal was able to discern that the slaves on this plantation were acting in concert to have the manager removed:

[T]he gang hearing this report, few endeavoured to contradict it but the greater part became clamorous and requested to have another master, or at least that the manager should be dismissed, this circumstance and the very unbecoming manner in which several of the

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<sup>175</sup> It is not made clear in the manager's testimony what the basket contains, nor if this was part of their normal duty or an extra duty 'paid' for with a dram of rum.

<sup>176</sup> Possibly on account of the several thefts of rum from the estate stores which are recorded elsewhere.

<sup>177</sup> The slaves got a regular allowance of rum on Wednesdays and Saturdays.

<sup>178</sup> CB2, 29 August 1825

complainants conducted themselves towards the manager during the investigation of yesterday induced me to conclude that the complaining had entered into a conspiracy to have the manager removed from the estate and in this opinion I was confirmed by the report of Mr. G. Schwartz, the agent of Mr. Gallez, the proprietor, who stated that the negroes to his knowledge had represented to their owner that the manager was too constantly in the field and interfered too much with them. I examined the gang, they appeared able, effective, well fed and no marks of recent punishment on any of them. Judging it necessary to disapprove of their preferring ungrounded complaints I directed Gallant and four others to be punished which was accordingly done.<sup>179</sup>

It is not surprising that the slaves did not “endeavour to contradict” the Fiscal’s report, as they would surely have agreed with it. They certainly wanted the manager removed, and clearly resented what they considered to be his constant interference in their lives. They had very likely used the technical complaint of Sunday work as a means to remove the manager.<sup>180</sup> The slaves considered it entirely reasonable to be left to themselves as much as possible in exchange (as under Hartman) for productive plantation work. While the Fiscal may have agreed with this practice, he could not agree that slaves were entitled to take co-ordinated steps to remove managers. This would surely have created a dangerous precedent in the colony.

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<sup>179</sup> CB2, 29 August 1825

<sup>180</sup> Though the Fiscal found against the slaves in this case, they could at least be satisfied with having caused some considerable inconvenience and expense on the estate, as discussed in Chapter One. The total cost of this victory to the slave owner for defending this ‘ungrounded’ complaint was f329 (guilders) on top of the lost production, the cost of travel, and the time and energy involved defending the case. f329 was about one sixth the price of a prime slave. It is interesting that ‘bad character’ slaves (who were often of little economic benefit to their owner) could incur costs through the complaint action almost equivalent to a bad slave’s value.

Representative actions did not need to involve a large number of slaves.<sup>181</sup> Quite often a small group of slaves presented the grievances of the gang they worked with. On plantation Vrouw Johanna four men brought an action against Mr. Linde before the Fiscal on 5 March 1825. Abraham, Klein Hendrick, Groot Hendrick and Philander all complained primarily about having been unjustly punished by Linde. This punishment was given as the result of what they argued was an inevitable consequence of Linde's own failure to maintain his estate properly, a condition which affected the entire work gang. They claimed that Linde's late partner in the estate, a Mr. Favre, had advised Linde "to get a new koker as the present one was all decayed". The workers had therefore cut timber for a new one, but there being no transportation available, it was not brought to the estate. Some time later the consequence of this neglected work became evident:

The driver, some days ago, told Mr. Linde that the spring tides would run over the koker. Master directed four hands to go and make a stop off in the draining trench to prevent the salt water getting in the cultivation. We four went to do this work. We found the trench too wide for us to make the stop off in time to prevent the water coming in. We therefore went aback where the driver was and told him of it. He replied, I do not know what to do. Next morning the driver took them to their master's door, after wishing him good morning their master ordered them to be flogged.<sup>182</sup>

The slaves thought this punishment very unjust because they considered that it was "impossible for four of us to stop off that large trench in time to keep out the high spring tides". They pointed out to the Fiscal that the entire gang of the nearby

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<sup>181</sup> For example on plantation Beerenstein the single plaintiff, Rosetta, when complaining of the manager Mr. Deussen and seeking his removal along with that of the driver Primo claimed that "all the people of Beerenstein will confirm the same" (CB1, 15 November 1820). Supporting her claim of representation, eleven of the gang took a collective action one month later, again requesting that the manager be removed. Curiously, Primo, who was complained of in the first action, now became a plaintiff himself, wishing that "the manager might be taken away, or that he might be elsewhere employed", (CB1, 29 December 1820).

<sup>182</sup> CB2, 5 March 1825

plantation Bestendigheid were unable to do the same task on their estate. While at the Fiscal's office, the four men also thought to add the additional grievances that their "master [was] cruel, that they work hard, have little fish and although they belong to a coffee estate there are no women on it".<sup>183</sup>

The clerk, recording Linde's response to the complaint, was careful to first note that Linde was "a coloured man".<sup>184</sup> Linde then went on to deny much of what Philander, who had been spokesman for the group, had reported. Far from the task having been a difficult one, Linde "considered in my own mind that it was as slight a morning's work as could be expected". He thought that the task could have been completed by the four men by eleven o'clock that morning. He then explained what happened after sending the men to their task:

About nine o'clock he the proprietor went to examine how they got on, by chance he walked on the side line of the next estate. The negroes could not see him, nor could he them until coming to the spot. To his great surprise he found two of them roasting plantains at a large fire and scarcely a commencement made of the work. He spoke to them on the subject and enquired if the driver had not told them before, that this work was to be finished at eleven, he made as further observation, then if the water comes in the estate you will get flogged and went away.<sup>185</sup>

This account seems to have the ring of truth about it. You can imagine the men standing about, a fair distance from any managerial supervision, happily roasting plantains, and confident that their work will not take long to complete. From Linde's own testimony he was struggling with his enterprise. Losses from an incursion of salt water would further drain his limited finances. The men were unable to complete the work before the tide came in and the cultivation was flooded with salt

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<sup>183</sup> CB2, 5 March 1825

<sup>184</sup> The need to use racial identifiers in the texts is examined in Chapter Eight.

<sup>185</sup> CB2, 5 March 1825

water. Linde then attempted to carry out his threat of a flogging and told his driver to bring the four men up the following morning:

This was accordingly done and after pointing out their neglect and the consequence likely to result from the salt water getting in to the cultivation, [I] directed Abraham to be laid down and tied to the stakes, which I had put in the ground. I was standing in my gallery about seven feet from the spot and he refused. I told the driver to lay him down, as soon as the driver put his hand on Abraham he threw him off and was immediately assisted by Klein Hendrick. They immediately overpowered the driver. The conduct of Abraham had on many occasions been so bad that I immediately formed the intention of bringing it before your honor and I cried out to the driver, stop, offer no more violence, if they deem my and your authority insufficient they will respect that of some one in town.<sup>186</sup>

Note that the driver on this occasion assisted the manager, but was not supported by any other slaves on the estate, and consequently was unable to effect the punishment, underlining the need for at least the tacit support of the gang for managerial authority to have any substance. It also indicates that the complaint was supported by the other slaves on the estate.

The Fiscal of Berbice was charged with upholding the rights of all the inhabitants of the colony, and not just those of the slaves. In this case, when Linde's authority was challenged, he decided to seek the official support of the Fiscal. Linde claimed that the slaves had merely got in first to complain to the Fiscal:

The four went to their work and I made preparations to go to town next morning to bring these circumstances to the knowledge of the Fiscal. That night I called up the driver and told him to direct Abraham, Klein Hendrick, Philander and Groot Hendrick to get ready to pull me to town tomorrow with another man to steer. Next morning after having given the necessary instructions for the day I enquired if the coriaal was ready. I was told not, on enquiring why? And to my astonishment learnt from the driver they the four complainants had absconded. I particularly asked if he the driver had acquainted them the evening before with my orders, he replied yes. I therefore ordered

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<sup>186</sup> CB2, 5 March 1825



other pullers and came to communicate the particulars of their conduct.<sup>187</sup>

Abraham and his friends thought to get the jump on Linde by complaining to the Fiscal before the manager had a chance to, and thereby mitigate their behaviour. So both slave and manager sought out a higher authority to address their concerns. This underlines both parties' recognition of a framework of norms and justice which ideally, and often in practice, regulated manager/slave relationships.<sup>188</sup>

Managers and owners had the right to seek to have unruly slaves punished in an official and exemplary manner, particularly if they felt that their slaves were getting out of control. The Fiscal was authorised to exceed whatever limit there was on the number of lashes legally permitted at the time.<sup>189</sup> He could also, as he did on this occasion, order a slave to be worked in chains. Naturally this 'service' attracted fees, which would explain the relatively few examples of managers or slave owners proffering a complaint to the Fiscal.<sup>190</sup> Though Linde would have had every reason to expect that his account of the behaviour of the four men would have clinched the case for him, as acts of violent resistance were usually enough to condemn any slave regardless of the circumstances, he nevertheless addressed the other grievances brought by the four men:

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<sup>187</sup> CB2, 5 March 1825

<sup>188</sup> Had the slaves no faith or investment in the system, one would have thought that they would have headed for the bush, rather than the Fiscal's office.

<sup>189</sup> The legal number of lashes permitted had been initially 39 strokes, which then decreased to 25 after the introduction of the 1826 Berbice Slave Code which came into effect on 1 November of that year. The code also outlawed the flogging of women, and prevented overseers from carrying whips into the field. Flogging was also to be administered only the day after the offence had been committed, and in this case the actions of Linde would seem to have anticipated the new regulations. The 1826 slave codes had been first proposed by an 1824 Order in Council, the year prior to this complaint.

<sup>190</sup> Remember the Fiscal acted for all the inhabitants of the colony, not just slaves, so that non-slaves were at liberty to bring complaint actions as well as slaves, though, unlike slaves, they would have been charged for the privilege.

With respect to short allowance of fish, they are to say if they get less than on other estates. If they work harder [during] the last seven years they have been with me [than before] ... they never mentioned [it] before. I bought the gang as they now are; a task gang. There was not a woman among them. I bought them at so high a price and property is so much depreciated I never have been able to purchase others.<sup>191</sup>

The driver McRae was called to give evidence. Though it was not directly recorded by the clerk, the Fiscal stated that the driver “corroborated the proprietor’s statement”. This is not surprising given his support for the manager when they had tried to flog the four plaintiffs. The Fiscal found the conduct of Abraham and Klein Hendrick to be “a most daring attempt to withstand the authority of the proprietor” and so punished them severely: Abraham was sentenced “to receive 50 lashes and work in chains for one month” while Klein Hendrick received 50 lashes and was confined every night for two weeks, while the other two were each to receive 39 lashes. The punishments ordered by the Fiscal in this case were unusually harsh, reflecting the fear most free inhabitants of the colony had of slave violence, especially violence perpetrated by a representative group.

It might be assumed that a collective work action brought by a group of slaves would have a greater chance of success than personal complaints, and this is borne out by the figures presented in the following Table 2.12, which lists the outcomes for slaves for their grievances based on the number of complainants involved in the action.

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<sup>191</sup> CB2, 5 March 1825

TABLE 2.12:  
OUTCOME OF WORK GRIEVANCES BY NUMBER OF COMPLAINANTS (1819-1827).<sup>192</sup>

	<i>Number involving single complainant</i>	<i>Percentage of recorded outcomes</i>	<i>Number involving 3 or more complainants</i>	<i>Percentage of recorded outcomes</i>
Complaint upheld	51	28%	257	40%
Complaint dismissed	38	21%	167	26%
Complainant admonished	25	14%	26	4%
Complainant punished	22	12%	66	10%
Complainant punished with whip	48	26%	119	19%
Total recorded results	184		635	

As previously noted, the outcomes have been graded from 1 to 5, with 1 being the most favourable and 5 the least favourable outcomes for grievances where results were recorded. Even taking a very narrow view of slave complaint strategy, which counts only cases thought by the colonial officials to have been worth bringing and thus upheld by the Fiscal, the differences in the outcomes for collective and individual complaints is apparent. Some 40 percent of complaints involving three or more complainants were officially upheld, compared with 28 percent of work complaints brought by a slave acting alone. Not surprisingly, the ratio is reversed when we look at those complaints which resulted in the slave being either admonished or punished, with 33% of work related complaints brought by three or more slaves treated this way, compared to more than 62% of slaves complaining alone.

More realistically, however, slaves would have viewed the complaint process in a much broader way than the Fiscal. Many of the grievances formally expressed by slaves in complaint actions were not necessarily the only, or even the principal,

<sup>192</sup> Data assembled from CB1, CB2, CB3, January 1819 to August 1827.

grievances they had with the manager. As we saw in the situation on plantation Noordsburg above, there were several unstated but significant issues which were in dispute between the slaves and the manager De Jong. The Fiscal's ruling on the technical aspects of the case were probably less important to the slaves than their ability to make their point about De Jong's interference in their private lives. To this end, knowing the costs and inconvenience involved, the slaves can be said to have thought the process worthwhile despite the outcome. Remember too, that this was not the first complaint against De Jong, and the negative response by the Fiscal to the first complaint did not deter an even larger group of slaves making the same complaint a few months later. Whichever way the results are interpreted, however, collective action remained more effective than individual action. The Fiscal may well have been more inclined to believe a group of people rather than a disgruntled individual. Moreover, some of the individual actions may have lacked substance.

Of course some actions by large groups of slaves appeared to officials not so much evidence of greater authenticity, but evidence of a potential uprising, as in the case of Herstelling, and were treated very seriously. The risk of allowing an incompetent or cruel manager to continue unchecked was perhaps not so dangerous as the risk of allowing a collective action by slaves to develop into a challenge to the slave system itself. For the most part, however, collective actions by workers were not threats to the hegemony of slave holders,<sup>193</sup> but actions that represented a general sense of injustice by a significant group of people acting to uphold their customary rights. Such actions were informed by the slave workers' 'moral economy', and

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<sup>193</sup> In the few cases brought by managers or owners against slaves for mutinous behaviour, none could be interpreted as rebellious. Most were very specific actions over a particular grievance, such as clothing or food allowances.

were thus supported by what E. P. Thompson has called “the wider consensus of the community”.<sup>194</sup> Given that the complaints were made at an official level, and made with some expectation of redress, the slave must have hoped that this ‘wider community’ included not just other slaves, but whites and officials in the colony as well. That officials recognised customary rights was demonstrated by comments made by the Fiscal M. S. Bennett who stated that, though a particular act was “not [prohibited] by any specific Ordinance, is, *nevertheless, contrary to the usage and custom of the Colony*”.<sup>195</sup>

### **Managers and workers**

On plantations like Herstelling and Noordsburg the disagreeable managers were portrayed as either incompetent or as unusually harsh compared to managers on other plantations or other managers the slaves had known. According to the slaves, these were managers who had over-extended the customary duties of slaves while at the same time failing to fulfil their responsibilities as competent managers. Slaves rated managers very differently, and the distribution of grievances laid against managers is significantly unbalanced. Managers accounted for the lion’s share of slave grievance actions. Table 2.13 indicates the distribution of grievances among different types of defendants:

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<sup>194</sup> E. P. Thompson, “The moral economy of the English crowd in the eighteenth century”, *Past and Present*, v50, 1971, p.78.

<sup>195</sup> Italics by the Fiscal (CO 116/143, Letter, M. S. Bennett to H. Beard, 1 June 1827).

TABLE 2.13:  
DISTRIBUTION OF ALL GRIEVANCES BY DEFENDANT STATUS (1819-1827).<sup>196</sup>

<i>Status of Defendant</i>	<i>Number of Grievances against</i>	<i>Percentage of Total</i>
Coloured or Black	213	11%
White	1711	89%
Free	1905	99%
Unfree	19	1%
Official (F1)	6	<1%
Owner (F2)	663	34%
Owner Manager (F3)	95	5%
Attorney (F4)	38	2%
Attorney Manager (F5)	39	2%
Employed Manager (F6)	1023	53%
Overseer (F7)	18	1%
Driver (U3)	6	<1%
Other worker (U9)	13	<1%
Civilian (F8)	21	1%

Among the managers working in Berbice, only a few accounted for the lion's share of those grievances levelled against managers. In Table 2.14 the distribution of grievances where a manager was the defendant illustrates that unequal distribution.

TABLE 2.14:  
DISTRIBUTION OF GRIEVANCES AMONG MANAGER DEFENDANTS (1819-1827).<sup>197</sup>

		Percentage of grievances against named managers	Percentage of Managers
Total number of named managers in all records	185		
Number of grievances levelled against managers	1023		
Number of grievances against named managers	905	100%	
Number levelled against top 10 named managers	499	55%	5%
Number levelled against top 20 named managers	664	73%	11%

<sup>196</sup> Data assembled from CB1, CB2, CB3, January 1819 to August 1827.

<sup>197</sup> Data assembled from CB1, CB2, CB3, January 1819 to August 1827. Note that managers include owner managers and attorney managers.

As indicated in the Table 2.14, just 10 managers accounted for over 55 percent of all slave grievances, and the 'worst' 20 managers accounted for 73 percent. In Table 2.15 the grievances have been filtered to include only those related to work, and where three or more slaves were involved in the action. The concentration of grievances among a small number of managers becomes even more apparent.

TABLE 2.15:  
DISTRIBUTION OF COLLECTIVE WORK RELATED GRIEVANCES AMONG MANAGER DEFENDANTS (1819-1827).<sup>198</sup>

		<i>Percentage of grievances against named managers</i>	<i>Percentage of Managers</i>
Number of collective work grievances against named managers	541	100%	
Number leveled against top 10 named managers	352	65%	5%
Number leveled against top 20 named managers	491	91%	11%
Total number of managers cited by name in collective work actions	29	100%	16%
Manager to grievance ratio	29/541	18 per manager	

In work related group action just 10 managers accounted for 65 percent of all grievances. Altogether just 29 managers were named in collective work dispute actions over the nine year period, from a total of about 185 managers mentioned in the records.<sup>199</sup> The manager to grievance ratio is naturally influenced by the fact that collective actions involve more slaves and thus more grievances, nevertheless it highlights the very narrow distribution of collective work grievances, especially when compared with personal grievances examined in the next chapter.

<sup>198</sup> Data assembled from CB1, CB2, CB3, January 1819 to August 1827.

<sup>199</sup> In 1826 there were just 141 workplaces which completed the compulsory punishment record books, so that some of the 185 managers mentioned worked on the same plantation but at different times.

Time and again, slaves making complaints emphasised that they were willing to work, and were eager to allay any fears in the minds of the officials that their complaints challenged anything but their customary rights.<sup>200</sup> Disliked managers were often characterised as being inept, cruel, dishonest, and even intrusive and patronising, as in the case of Ziemine who was “content and happy when her master comes” but hated the manager who “minds us as if we were children”.<sup>201</sup> Sometimes slaves attributed managerial incompetence to inexperience, as with the manager Spangenburg who was said to have been “but a short time in this colony, and never was on an estate before” and therefore did not know “how to deal with negroes”, and who knew “little of negro work and treatment”.<sup>202</sup> Other plaintiffs asked nothing more than to have a manager they would “be able to please”, and one who understood “the working and treatment of slaves”, or in other words, one who understood the traditional rights, customs and responsibilities of slaves and managers.<sup>203</sup>

The conditions of work were more likely to affect a wider group of people on a plantation than most other aspects of slave life. The fact that such grievances were concentrated among a relatively small group of managers shows that bad managers were relatively rare. Similarly we find in the following Table 2.16 that a minority of managers accounted for a majority of slave punishments.

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<sup>200</sup> See Table 7.9 in Chapter Seven for more evidence of how different managers could effect plantation life.

<sup>201</sup> CB1, 17 November 1823.

<sup>202</sup> Testimony of the slave worker Esterre, and testimony of the driver Samuel, (CB1, 2 January 1821).

<sup>203</sup> CB1, 2 January 1821. There are numerous other examples of this situation in the documents, for example, (CB1, 15 November 1819), (CB1, 29 December 1820), (CB1, 25 November 1820).



TABLE 2.16:  
DISTRIBUTION OF PUNISHMENTS AMONG PLANTATIONS, BERBICE (1826-1827).<sup>204</sup>

	<i>Number of slaves</i>	<i>Number of punishments</i>
Plantations where managers give a high number of punishments	5953	4294
Percentages	30%	61%
Plantations where managers give a low number of punishments	13369	2718
Percentages	70%	39%

Most managers were thus able to work with the community of slaves on the estates without acrimony. This does not mean that slaves on plantations without such disputes or low punishment regimes were contented, but given that the complaint process was available to all slaves, then the figures must surely indicate a significant level of work compliance by the majority of slaves. Slaves accepted the need to maintain a reasonable level of work and had established a very clear understanding of what managers could and could not expect from them, and did not hesitate to complain of any infractions of established conditions by aberrant management. These established or customary duties were recognised by most managers and officials. The Fiscal himself, in the following case concerning five slaves working for J. P. Broer, summed up the position of established work practices in the colony:

The gang was called up, and the complainants directed to point out the work required ... Mr. Broer, and his manager, Mr. Brumont, being present; this being done, it appeared evident to us that the quantity of work ... were considerably more than ought to be required.

The third charge, of being made to work on Sunday, was denied by Mr. Broer; the manager, being cautioned to state whether this charge was grounded on fact or not, said "that they had planted corn, and got hog and cow meat on Sunday, until eleven o'clock."

The fourth charge, of not being sufficiently fed, was denied by the manager; he admitted that the negroes received but one bunch of

<sup>204</sup> Data assembled from PBI, November 1826 to July 1827.

plantains a week, but stated they were at liberty during the week to cut another bunch for themselves, and referred himself to the driver, La Rose, to prove this assertion, who greatly contradicted the same; the manager could not state that he had ever given any specific order to driver to allow this privilege.

I therefore directed Mr. Broer to diminish the task of work imposed on his negroes, directed that each negro should be provided with two bunches of plantains a week, and two pounds salt fish ... that the negroes should not be employed on Sunday, on no work whatever, save such as is directed by ordinance of the honourable court; and I informed him of my intention of prosecuting him for the several penalties he had incurred ... and lastly, I directed the negroes, that if the redress now ordered was not attended to, they should wait on the burgher officer of the district ... and represent the same to him.<sup>205</sup>

This single case covers the main aspects of work which concerned the majority of slaves – a level of work that they could accommodate, incontestable free time, and an adequate food allowance. The Fiscal's treatment of the case also demonstrates that the working community in Berbice had little time for those who would upset the negotiated balance struck between slaves and management. The burden of work on a plantation fell to a core group of slaves, and gaining the co-operation of these slaves was essential.<sup>206</sup>

It was not only the usually white managers employed by plantation owners who could present difficulties for slaves. Slaves protested when anyone involved in the management of a plantation, slave or free, upset the community's customary practices and exceeded hitherto accepted limits on authority, so that aberrant drivers could also be brought to task by the workers. Rosetta on Beerenstein, for example, complained she had "nothing to say against the manager nor her owner, but that the

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<sup>205</sup> CB1, 12 March 1819.

<sup>206</sup> See Table 3.3 in Chapter Three which shows that the classifications for 'inferior' workers, indicate that under-productive workers constituted a significant number of slave workers on a plantation. Those assessed as 'inferior', aged, diseased, non effective, and child slaves, amounted to nearly 37% of the slave population. If you include those skilled workers whose functions were ancillary to production, such as drivers, domestics, etc. then the figure rises to nearly 49 percent. These slaves would have course required food, clothing, and housing.

driver Zealand is ... the ruler of the estate, so that the manager has less to say than he".<sup>207</sup> Similarly, when some slaves used their positions within the plantation hierarchy to challenge customary practices their fellow slaves could easily protest, such as two of the slaves belonging to Mr. J. G. C. de Nieuwerkirk who testified to the Protector against a fellow slave Sunday. Nieuwerkirk's housekeeper complained that Sunday "gets drunk and falls asleep in the kitchen, when I am obliged to cook for him" and that "he said in my hearing that his master was no gentleman". Paris, also working on the estate, further complained that Sunday used "very abusive language" and that "he, Sunday, shared out the same morning pork to the other negroes, whereof he kept five pounds for his own allowance".<sup>208</sup>

The practice of accommodation and the stabilisation of communities, by both slaves and managers, not only safeguarded the well being of the slaves, but also the wellbeing of the colony, and thus the sustainability of industrial plantation agriculture, which relied on the compliance and co-operation of the slave work force. This alliance of exploited and marginalised labour with vulnerable and conscientious managers suited the purposes of the colony and provided profitable returns for the European investors, no doubt increasingly glad of their remoteness from an increasingly questionable system of labour exploitation.

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<sup>207</sup> CB2, 8 February 1825.

<sup>208</sup> CB3, 28 December 1926.

### Chapter 3: Working life in Berbice 2

#### Personal work issues

If one of the principal features causing collective work disputes was bad management, the reverse was more often the case in personal work disputes. In collective work grievances, a small number of managers were responsible for the vast majority of grievances, with just 29 named managers cited as defendants in collective work complaint actions. In work actions involving just one complainant, however, a very different picture emerges, with some 69 managers cited in complaint actions. These managers bore 153 grievances from 112 complainants – fair indication that a good manager might keep the majority of slaves relatively content, but that there would always be those individual slaves who, contrary to the prevailing sentiments of the community, took exception to some aspect of their working lives. Thus, many of the work disputes involving just one complainant were idiosyncratic to that degree that they attracted little sympathy from either managers, officials or other slaves.<sup>209</sup> Perhaps as a consequence, individual work disputes were less likely to result in any form of redress for the complainant than were collective work disputes. From Table 2.12 in the last chapter, we found that while 40 percent of collective complainants got redress for their work grievances, that figure fell to just

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<sup>209</sup> For example: Willem on plantation Maria & Agnes who admitted, “I can’t agree either with my master or the Negroes” (CB2, 1 February 1824); or Tobias on plantation Friends who was “disliked by all the other negroes on the estate” (CB1, 18 September 1822).

28 percent for individuals. Moreover, 33 percent of collective complainants were admonished or punished, but this figure jumped to 52 percent for personal work grievances. So, while a slave taking part in a collective dispute had a better than even chance of a positive outcome, those taking personal actions had nearly twice the chance of a negative outcome than for a positive one. The influence of managers is reflected in Table 3.1 and should be compared with Table 2.15 in the previous chapter.

TABLE 3.1:  
DISTRIBUTION OF PERSONAL WORK RELATED GRIEVANCES AMONG MANAGER  
DEFENDANTS (1819-1827).<sup>210</sup>

		<i>Percentage of grievances against named managers</i>	<i>Percentage of named Managers</i>
Number of work grievances involving 1 complainant	275		
Number of work grievances involving 2 complainants	70		
Total number of work grievances involving 1 or 2 complainants	345		
Number of named managers	185		
Number of personal work grievances against named managers	148		
Number personal work grievances against top 10 named managers	49	33%	5%
Number personal work grievances against top 20 named managers	79	53%	11%
Total number of managers cited by name in personal work actions	68	100%	37%
Manager to grievance ratio	68/148	2.1 per manager	

There were 68 managers cited in personal work grievances from a total of 185 named managers, or 37 percent. This compares with just 16 percent of managers who were named as defendants of collective work grievances. From Table 2.15 we found that there were a total of 29 managers who defended some 541 collective work

<sup>210</sup> Data assembled from CB1, CB2, CB3, January 1819 to August 1827.

grievances, a manager to grievance ratio of 18 grievances per manager. This compares with just over 2 grievances per manager in personal work disputes.

Though these figures are somewhat distorted by the fact that there are axiomatically more complainants in collective work disputes, and hence more grievances per complaint action, we can still see that managers defending collective work grievances were significantly less representative than managers who defended personal work grievances. That the vast majority of managers were able, over a nine year period, to avoid any collective work dispute requires explanation. There is no evidence to suggest that managers could effectively prevent slaves from complaining to the Fiscal. Moreover, it seems unlikely that larger groups of slaves were less able than individuals to take on the authority of the manager, and yet the figures show that more than twice as many managers were cited by individuals than by groups of three or more slaves. I believe that the only rational explanation lies in the ability of most managers to cater to the needs of the working community, or at least to the needs of a significant representative group of slaves on their plantations. This is clear evidence that most workers had come to a satisfactory agreement with management over their work arrangements on most plantations. This is backed both by the evidence of the data in the figures above and by the slaves themselves in their testimonies reviewed in the previous chapter who vociferously rejected new managers they did not like.

Nevertheless, the lives of most ordinary people in almost any society are dominated by personal concerns, and despite the generally negative responses to individual work grievances, many individual complainants found their way to the Fiscal's office seeking remedy. Though collective grievances considerably outnumbered individual grievances, there were more individual actions than

collective ones. Taking complaint actions only, we find that from the 197 recorded complaint actions predominantly concerned with work issues brought before the authorities, some 136 were brought by an individual, while just 48 actions were collective.<sup>211</sup> For many it was enough to worry about getting enough food for one's child during the coming week, or time off to tend a provision ground, or enough rum for an upcoming festivity, than to deliberate on the broader aspects of work regimes which affected the entire community, and about which a significant degree of agreement and co-ordination would have to take place.

The particular work grievances that concerned individuals more so than groups can be determined from the figures in Table 3.2, which indicates the general distribution of work grievances.

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<sup>211</sup> Data assembled from CB1, CB2, CB3, January 1819 to August 1827.

TABLE 3.2:  
DISTRIBUTION OF WORK GRIEVANCES (1819-1827).<sup>212</sup>

<i>Grievance</i>	<i>Code</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>1 cmplt</i>	<i>Percent 1 cmplt</i>	<i>2 cmplt.s</i>	<i>Percent 2 cmplt.s</i>	<i>3 + cmplt.s</i>	<i>Percent 3 + cmplt.s</i>
Allowance, clothing	EAC	107	18	17%	6	6%	83	78%
Allowance, food	EAF	203	33	16%	10	5%	160	79%
Money or property owed	EAM	20	13	65%	0	0%	7	35%
		330	64	19%	16	5%	250	76%
Work-time grievance	ECT	305	14	5%	5	2%	286	94%
Workload grievance	ECW	209	26	12%	15	7%	168	80%
Vocational dispute	ECI	89	27	30%	3	3%	59	66%
Housing grievance	ECQ	4	1	25%	3	75%	0	0%
Interference in slave economy	ECE	67	8	12%	0	0%	59	88%
Health grievance	ECH	114	63	55%	8	7%	43	38%
Childcare grievance	ECC	27	1	4%	0	0%	26	96%
Unjust/excess punishment work rel.	ECU	192	68	35%	20	10%	104	54%
Other work related grievance	ECO	3	3	100%	0	0%	0	0%
		1010	211	21%	54	5%	799	79%

Interestingly, the figures for childcare disputes show that only one action was brought by an individual, none brought by two complainants, but twenty-six such grievances were brought by a group. Topping the list, however, is money owed to slaves. These complaints became increasingly common as more and more slaves entered the formal economy of the colony. Typical of this type of complaint are the following:

[Sunday, belonging to the Fort]: I have cut fifty-four bundles of grass for Mr. Shelburne, the Barrack Master, for which he promised to give me two bitts a bundle. I cut the same after I have finished Mr. Brown's work, and have only received from Mr. Shelburne five guilders. So that I come to the Protector for assistance as to the recovery of my money.<sup>213</sup>

<sup>212</sup> Data assembled from CB1, CB2, CB3, January 1819 to August 1827.

<sup>213</sup> CB3, 8 November 1826.



[Bob states that] Mr. Angus Reeseman, is indebted to him in the sum of six guilders for weeding the grass in his yard, which he cannot recover.<sup>214</sup>

[John belonging to Simon Davidson] Mr. Buie, clerk to Mr. Davidson, hired a corgaal which I owned, for the period of sixteen weeks ... at the rate of 11 guilders per week. The corgaal was subsequently lost. When I asked Mr. Buie for the amount of hire for the corgaal, he said it was too much. At the time I hired the corgaal to him, I asked him for a paper; he did not give it, and said I must be afraid.<sup>215</sup>

[Edward belonging to Dr. Beresford states] ... that he used to hire himself from his master, and was a pork butcher. That he sold a quarter weighing 30lbs to Dr. H. R. McGee, the price thereof is 15 francs, which he now refuses to pay.<sup>216</sup>

These complaints come from the latter period of the records, when such complaints were now brought before the Protector of Slaves, and are characteristic of a shift in emphasis of slave concerns. Not surprisingly, these complaints of failure by whites to pay their debts to industrious slaves were very sympathetically dealt with by the officials.

### **Vocational issues**

Slaves understood their role in their society, but as workers they were also often keenly aware of their own abilities, skills and inclinations, as well as their own limitations. Many slaves took pride in their work and wanted to do a good job, and were sometimes frustrated by poor management decisions, lack of adequate tools, or work practices which countered their efforts to complete a task to their satisfaction or in a way that would only mean more work later on. When a workers felt they were

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<sup>214</sup> CB3, 12 December 1826.

<sup>215</sup> CB3, 3 January 1827.

<sup>216</sup> CB3, 17 January 1827.

in the wrong job, a protest would often follow. Table 3.1 shows that there were 89 vocational grievances expressed by slave complainants in 34 actions brought before the Fiscal. Of the 34 actions, 25 were actions involving just one complainant, and this underlines the very personal nature of this type of dispute. Vocational disputes, however, had little chance of success. From Table 2.11 it can be seen that vocational disputes had the lowest success outcome of any grievance. The score for slaves was 3.91, the highest and thus least favourable of all work grievances. For managers the score of 1.74 was the lowest and most successfully defended action. Such a discrepancy points to a major difference of interpretation between some slaves and colonial officials about the duties slaves had to their managers and to their work. In the view of the officials, managers had the right to direct slaves to whatever work they saw fit. That so many slaves failed to recognise this and persisted with this type of complaint indicates perhaps that many slaves were able to get the sort of work which suited them best, and that only when managers had to override such accommodation to facilitate their operations did the slaves seek redress. Officially, slaves had no choice, but customarily they may well have had some say in the distribution of work and work practices, even if the custom was not established as a 'right'.

Despite the low success rate, slaves involved in vocational disputes could certainly cause considerable trouble for managers, as the following cases highlight. On plantation Schepmoed, for example, Jimmy did not like his job. He had no objection to work, just to the work which the manager, Mr. Terlet, had assigned him. By the time Jimmy brought a complaint action to the Fiscal on 7 January 1825, the dispute between himself and his manager had already been going on for some time,

with both sides determined not to give way. Thus the complaint action can be seen as the culmination of a long standing conflict. Jimmy was unhappy about his new work minding cows, and he preferred working in the field with his friends, where he had little or no responsibility. From Jimmy's point of view, it was bad enough having to work, without having to think about it as well. He raised his grievance in the first instance with the manager:

"Sir, I can't mind cows."

"Don't be afraid, I will not punish you."

"I am not afraid, for if you do punish me I should run in the bush. I much prefer working with my mattees in the field."<sup>217</sup>

John Terlet was unmoved and dismissed Jimmy, who then ambled sullenly to his work at the pens, while the manager continued towards the field where the gang was at its work. Terlet had not heard the last of Jimmy's grievance, however,<sup>218</sup> and Jimmy's next step was to bring his grievance to the Fiscal. The complaint in this case was reasonably clear cut in that there seems to have been no issue other than Jimmy's desire to do field work rather than pen work. His complaint about his flogging and confinement, both ordered by the manager, related entirely to his refusal to work anywhere but in the field with the majority of the gang. Jimmy made his complaint after having given pen work a fair trial, but he found the work

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<sup>217</sup> Extract of testimony of Jimmy describing his conversation with Mr. Terlet, (CB2, 7 January 1825). The word 'mattees' was commonly used in the records, see for example testimony of Jim (CB1, 17 November 1823), testimony of Willem (CB2, 1 May 1824), testimony of Nelson (CB2, 24 July 1825), testimony of Vincent (CB2, 4 November 1825). The significance and use of the word is fully discussed in Chapter Five.

<sup>218</sup> John Terlet's days of dealing with slave grievances would be numbered, like many managers, Terlet would disappear from the records within a year. Another Terlet, K. Terlet, prospered as manager of plantation Op Hoepen Beter as well as being a Civil Magistrate for 4<sup>th</sup> Division Berbice River. He was perhaps John's brother, the name is not a common one.

unsatisfactory. The first grievance centred on the time it took to do all the small chores associated with the position:

As soon as I get up I have to clean the cow pen and the others, so that it is generally nine o'clock before I can go to other work.<sup>219</sup>

He was also required to be the fisherman for the estate, and his duties there were more complicated and troublesome than he liked:

I am to be fisherman also, for this purpose he [the manager] sent me over the river to cut sticks to make a pen, to catch fish. I stopped off a creek, he said there was no fish there I must loose it, he sent three men to stop off a creek, they had not finished it. He sent them off after working there two days, for a week he sent no one. I was then sent with two men to finish it but all that was done was by this time broken away.<sup>220</sup>

Jimmy here is complaining about his wasted and pointless efforts, the manager moving him on after he had already invested his time and energy on the first site. It might be considered that slaves, with no reason to profit from their labours, would care little whether the work they did was useful or not, but this does not seem to have been the case with many of the slaves who provided testimony. After Jimmy's wasted effort at the riverside, he still had to contend with his other duties looking after the animals:

At five o'clock I must return from the river side where I am cutting bush with prickles (thorns) to stop off the creek, to drive and milk the cows.<sup>221</sup>

Then came the dispute over the specific work of building pens to catch fish:

After being employed with the two men two days massa came to see what we were doing. He don't not find us - after coming home he enquired, I told him we had moved from that spot where we had been

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<sup>219</sup> CB2, 7 January 1825

<sup>220</sup> CB2, 7 January 1825

<sup>221</sup> CB2, 7 January 1825. Note here how the clerk had 'translated' the term prickles with the term 'thorn', further evidence that the words were Jimmy's, but that the clerk thought they might have been confusing for a subsequent reader.

cutting and plating these (thorns). He said he would confine me a whole week in the stocks. He locked me up that night.<sup>222</sup>

The next day he was told to return to his work, to which he agreed so long as that work was in the field:

Next morning he told me to go to work I said yes I will work but I cannot mind cows, sheep and hogs and do other things besides, send me to the field then I know what I am about and what I have to do.<sup>223</sup>

Field work, though often hard and monotonous, involved little thought and had the advantage of being shared by a large group of people. Thus Jimmy abandoned his work with the animal and fish pens as ordered by the manager, and went to the field. The manager said nothing at first, but after two days of deliberately working in the field contrary to the manager's orders, Jimmy was flogged and then confined for four weeks with just "three plantains and a calabash of water each day". By going to the field Jimmy demonstrated that he was quite willing to work, and there is no mention by the manager that he was not a capable field worker. Having a productive worker removed from any kind of work for four weeks would have been a serious matter for a manager. Terlet must have felt that the principles involved justified the loss of labour.

As with many complaints, the general facts of the matter were not in dispute, just the interpretation of those facts, or the small details which surrounded them. Terlet began his statement by confirming that "the complainant's statement is more or less correct", but his detailing of the incident which sparked Jimmy's action provides some greater depth to those facts:

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<sup>222</sup> CB2, 7 January 1825

<sup>223</sup> CB2, 7 January 1825

I did send him to pull out the sticks that has been put in the creek by the men previous to his being employed at this work and gave him two men to assist him. He stated that this assistance was not sufficient and wanted the use of the large punt. It was in town but as soon as it returned I gave it to him with the three punt men at one o'clock. He there had five hands with himself. Next morning the punt men went to the field but he remained with the other two hands working at this creek for two days longer having the use of the punt. Finding that the labour was much and the water not suiting, as he could go to that work only after driving out the stock and milking the cows. I directed him to let this work lay over, on a Monday, I told him as the water now suited to take two men and begin again that same evening. I asked him when will you finish, will it be completed tomorrow, he said yes the next day it will. I went there at one o'clock Tuesday and found it very nearly finished, all that was to be done I think could be done in an hour, it was just a yard or two of the side unfinished. They were not at work, but I was informed they were on the opposite side of the river with some leprous negroes<sup>224</sup> whom I have positively ordered should not be visited fearful of infection. The complainant came to the stelling about five o'clock that evening (Tuesday). I enquired where he had been, and having told him I have inspected his work and that he had taken away the two men who were under his orders and allowed them to loiter away their time the whole afternoon without doing any thing I would lock him up in the stocks for eight nights but make him work through the day. I also asked him if the creek was finished, he said no, it requires a very little to be done but it is as good as finished. I then told him I had been there at one o'clock, and had seen it, therefore the work that was yet to be done when I saw it at one ought to have been finished long ago.<sup>225</sup>

After this the manager confined Jimmy much as Jimmy had described, adding only that Jimmy had been extremely insolent, saying to the manager, "you may lock me up in the stocks but if you ever get me to mind cows again I will be d\_\_\_d". There followed a battle of wills between the manager and Jimmy over what work he would do.<sup>226</sup>

Next morning the hospital man enquired if Jimmy was to be released. I said yes, let him go to work. I did not speak to him. Instead of going to his work he went to work in the field gang. At night he was locked up again, at eight o'clock next morning he joined several invalids working about the yard, at night he was confined again. Next

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<sup>224</sup> Note the reference to the nearby bush negroes. Also note their "leprous" state, another possible reason slaves hesitated to join such groups.

<sup>225</sup> CB2, 7 January 1825.

<sup>226</sup> CB2, 7 January 1825.

morning, finding he was determined to go to such work as he pleased to go, I directed the driver to punish him with the whip.<sup>227</sup>

The manager denied locking Jimmy up for four weeks, but could not remember the exact time. It was while Jimmy was in the stocks that he was able to make his escape and he then came to town to lodge the complaint against Terlet with the Fiscal.<sup>228</sup>

There were principles involved for both the manager and Jimmy in this case, principles which unmistakably show the value of self respect and pride to both individuals. Jimmy had sacrificed his comfort, the manager his productivity, and both had refused to sacrifice their principles. It is impossible to know what Jimmy hoped to achieve with the action, and whether he thought that the Fiscal would support his quest to do work of his own, rather than his manager's, choosing. It is clear, however, that Jimmy felt strongly enough about it to suffer lengthy punishments. Most probably Jimmy felt he had not much to lose – at the very worst he would end up minding cows, exactly what he would have been doing if he had not begun his actions of obstinacy or brought the complaint to the Fiscal. As it turned out, he was ordered by the Fiscal to return to the estate and do whatever work the manager required of him, though we are left to wonder if the manager tried to get him to mind cows again. At the very least Jimmy had had a break from both work and the stocks, and spent some time off the estate visiting town. Moreover, he had made his point and had been able to give voice to his wants. The only question we are left with, and one that will be addressed in Chapter Six, given Jimmy's strong

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<sup>227</sup> CB2, 7 January 1825.

<sup>228</sup> Although Jimmy made his escape when another slave was placed in the stocks (necessitating the release of the stocks) it is curious that the overseer, who had put the other slave in the stocks, did not prevent Jimmy from absconding, or indeed why the manager only "supposed" this had happened.

feelings about his work, why he did not just simply walk in the opposite direction, towards the bush rather than New Amsterdam.<sup>229</sup>

The case of Sandy on plantation Dankbaarheid, though it also involved an individual grievance relating to a demarcation dispute, was rather less loftily conceived than Jimmy's. It differed, however, in the fact that Sandy, unlike Jimmy, did not want to do field work. Sandy claimed to have been originally employed as a carpenter on the plantation "to assist in building negro houses, after they were finished he was put in the field". There he "used his best endeavouring to do the work the best he could but not being accustomed to it, he did not give the manager satisfaction". The incident provoking the complaint began just before Christmas. Sandy claimed that after his difficulty with field work the manager, Mr. Brauker, had "beat him with a stick which made him fall down" and that he was then locked in the stocks till the new year.<sup>230</sup>

It is likely that Sandy would have known that a charge of beating with a stick was against the slave codes, yet the manager, in his testimony, did not even address the matter. Instead Brauker began his response by pointing out to the Fiscal that Sandy was "constantly in the state of intoxication and procures strong liquor wherever and whenever he can get it". He then explained that he did not expect any real quantity of work from Sandy, so long as "the work was done better". He had personally demonstrated, for example, how far to bury a plantain stool. The next day he "examined his work and it was, if possible, worse than the day before". Brauker asked "if that was the fashion to work?", to which Sandy had replied, "it is my

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<sup>229</sup> CB2, 7 January 1825

<sup>230</sup> CB2, 19 January 1825.



fashion". The manager then ordered Sandy to the stocks, but next morning Sandy "beg[ed] to let him out as it was holidays and promised to do better". The manager consented. When it was time for the gang to get their allowances on the following Sunday, Sandy was reputedly "so drunk he could scarcely stand", which the manager "took no notice of". Brauker claimed not to have seen Sandy again for several days. On the Tuesday following the holidays Sandy was put to saw crab wood, indicating that Brauker had in fact acquiesced in Sandy's demands to be employed in the work for which he was qualified, carpentry, for sawing wood was more the duty of a carpenter than a field worker. Unfortunately, Brauker was no more impressed with Sandy's work as a sawyer than with his field work. Brauker lamented that "the usual task being 100 feet, he finished only 30". Exasperated, Brauker had Sandy put in the stocks that night and ordered him to be flogged the next morning.<sup>231</sup>

The Fiscal was unlikely to have been much moved by Sandy's complaint and explained that Sandy was "notoriously known as a drunkard he having lived in town for many years", and thus ordered him to be punished. It would appear from the testimony that Sandy's vocational inclinations had more to do with the avoidance of work, rather than the nature of it. If the manager Brauker is to be believed, then Sandy's work behaviour on the plantation would have been difficult to moderate. Sandy appears to have been so resolute in his dissipation as to become more of a nuisance than a help to management. In terms of work demographics, Sandy most likely fell into the category of 'inferior negroes' whose economic benefit to the plantation system would have been marginal at best.<sup>232</sup> Such slaves were difficult to

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<sup>231</sup> CB2, 19 January 1825.

<sup>232</sup> See Table 3.3 later in this chapter.

sell, and so for owners it remained a case of judicious oversight for the majority of their transgressions, with the occasional example made of the slave for the sake of appearances.<sup>233</sup>

Piet on plantation Vrouw Johanna was also a carpenter, but he had more practical considerations for the Fiscal to attend. His vocational dispute encompassed work tools, work practices, work materials and unrealistic managerial expectations.

I am a carpenter, I work as such. I have no tools. The master bought 1 saw, 1 plane and 1 chisel, and says if I require other tools I must borrow them from my mattees, if they are lost I am to pay for them. The Saturday previous to my complaint I was told to examine the mill and put it in order, with the pumps see the suckers were in order. We began to grind there was no water in the trench, consequently the mill did not work. Master said it was my fault, previous to our beginning to pick coffee the driver told him we would not be able to grind it as there was no water. He master said I will take in water but never did. Master said it was my fault the mill did not grind. I got frightened and came away the old flogging which was still visible made me alarmed. I had recently been flogged. I made a case to put coffee in and told him I wanted oakum to cork the seems, he said when we go to town; we did go to town I asked for it he said go about your business when I got home I corked it the best way I could and pitched it over. Master said I had done it badly on purpose. He locked me in the stocks at night next morning he gave me severe flogging. I received 55 lashes McRae the driver flogged me.<sup>234</sup>

The vocational problems for Piet were numerous. There is the question of work tools which he had been made responsible for, and interestingly was responsible in a financial way. Even though his work could only really benefit the proprietor there was an assumption of responsibility on the part of the slave which of itself questions the nature of slavery as it was understood by those in the colony at the time. The defendant, E. Favre replied to Piet's testimony:

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<sup>233</sup> CB2, 19 January 1825.

<sup>234</sup> CB2, 5 November 1824.

E. Favre<sup>235</sup> part proprietor states that previous to commencing grinding complainant was sent to put the mill to rights, which he so entirely neglected that when the negroes began to grind the mill pump would not throw up water, it was examined and found that complainant had not touched it for which he received a threat of a slight correction. States that there is abundance of water which is take in from the Koker, all estates now being obliged to take in salt water. Denies the statement of receiving 55 lashes and refers to the driver, who in presence of complainant says his story is not true, complainant found guilty for quitting the property and neglect of duty. Directed to receive 39 lashes.

From this and other disputes it seems that McRae was not a popular driver, and could hardly be seen as an unbiased witness in this case.<sup>236</sup> Nor does Favre deny that he failed to provide oakum to adequately caulk the seems,<sup>237</sup> necessary for Piet to have been able to repair the mill properly. This could easily have been the cause of its failure, rather than Piet's neglect. Whether or not there was sufficient water is something impossible to know, as the two stories are contradictory and no evidence was provided to determine the matter. Much the same can be said for the case in general: either the estate was poorly run and badly maintained, with the slaves doing their best with the facilities provided, or Piet was lazy and negligent in his duty. Nevertheless it could be assumed from both testimonies that slave and manager agreed that the proper running of an estate involved the co-operation of diligent slaves with competent managers. Even if Piet did not feel inclined to offer the estate his diligence, he clearly understood that this was expected from him and that this was necessary for the estate to run smoothly. The work ethics, therefore, were more or

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<sup>235</sup> Mr. Favre, a mulatto, was dead by 5 March 1825. Interestingly he was later portrayed by the slaves on Vrouw Johanna as attentive to estate maintenance when he was reputed to have told his partner Linde "to get a new koker as the present one was all decayed" and had subsequently got the men to get some new wood ready (CB2, 5 March 1825).

<sup>236</sup> See the case in the previous chapter (CB2, 5 March 1825).

<sup>237</sup> A cotton like substance used to bind pitch and caulk wooden seems.

less shared by both parties, and only the facts of the matter, and the apportionment of blame, were in dispute.

While incompetent managers could strain worker-manager relations, so too could managers who were unable to trust workers to do their work without constant supervision. In the previous chapter we saw that constant observation by managers was resented by slaves. Davy on plantation Herstelling worked as a sawyer under the control of the estate carpenter Mr. McKenzie, but objected to the close supervision of his work by McKenzie:

Mr. McKenzie, the carpenter, finds fault with the way I hold the saw. He says if I do not hold it otherwise he will punish me. I told him it does not matter how I hold the saw, so I am doing the work required of me. Mr McKenzie before yesterday called Mr. Kennedy to get me punished, when he himself came with a whip ... and flogged me himself with the same. At night I said nothing, but went home. Yesterday I went to work, but was sawing my usual way, when Mr. McKenzie commenced beating and kicked me with his foot; he pushed me against the saw.<sup>238</sup>

One can imagine the distress of the carpenter McKenzie, a tradesman from Britain and probably proud of his craft, witnessing what he considered to be an improper handling of the carpenter's tools. Equally one can imagine Davy, doing the work he was ordered in his own fashion and resentful of the level of control McKenzie wanted over his craft, of which he too was proud. The fact that Davy refused to comply with the head carpenter's wishes illustrates once again that there was no expectation of unbridled domination from managers, and Davy felt justified in defying McKenzie's instructions about something Davy considered not to have been within the purview of the tacit agreement between workers and management. The manager, Mr. Kennedy, admitted that he was at fault but "that being irritated by the

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<sup>238</sup> CB3, 5 April 1827.

obstinate behaviour of the complainant, he took the whip and gave him while at work two or three lashes” and hence begged that “the fine might be mitigated or lessened”. The Protector, however, referred the case to the Fiscal for prosecution. Significantly, no mention of the way the slave worked was made by the Fiscal, but it is clear that Davy was not prepared to be told how to do his job so long as the job was done satisfactorily.

Vocational grievances took many forms, and the depth and breadth of the complaints serve to demonstrate the depth and breadth of the characters involved, and it is not always easy to isolate a single concern from such complex personalities. Motivating a worker to take a complaint to the Fiscal, an action which amounted to litigation, commonly involved individuals with very personal grievances, and ones that could not be shared or resolved by their community. Such people were often as much at odds with their fellow workers as they were with their managers. It could be argued that no particular case could, therefore, represent such characters for the very reason of their non-representative nature. But individual cases can illustrate just how idiosyncratic slave work affected those subordinated to it in a variety of complex ways. The case brought by a man called Gasper against his manager, Baillie Chisholme, certainly falls into this category. Gasper’s character, as revealed in his own and his manager’s testimony, defies the image of the slave as an elementary soul stunted by the trauma of slavery. Similarly, Chisholme himself presents as an unusual character who challenges the stereotypical image of a plantation manager.

One Sunday in November 1825 Baillie Chisholme, on plantation Vryburg, looked out over a field of blooming coffee trees, a sea of white, jasmine-scented blossoms, brilliant in the Sunday morning sun, and perhaps hoped to avoid one of the

many trifling problems which beset all managers in the colony during their working life. Like many managers working for absentee owners he would probably try not to think too much about his employers for whom he toiled in that desolate country. The Brown family lived in London,<sup>239</sup> no doubt more comfortably thanks to the work that Chisholme and his workers did for them on the plantation, all supervised by the family's attorney in New Amsterdam. It may well have been difficult for an educated man such as Chisholme<sup>240</sup> not to resent his position, sweating out his life in the cultural vacuum of Berbice, where suitable companionship, even among the scarce white population, was difficult to find. Little wonder, then, at Chisholme's annoyance when his hospital nurse Gasper came to him on his day of rest with a dispute Gasper was having with another slave on the plantation. Plantation Vryberg, as with most plantations in the colony, maintained a hospital of sorts, where a full time nurse was commonly appointed.<sup>241</sup> On Vryberg, Gasper filled that position. As a result of the events on that Sunday, he eventually took a complaint to the Fiscal of unjust treatment by the manager, Baillie Chisholme. Though a complaint of unjust treatment was common enough, the circumstances involved in this action were not. Gasper's version of the events follows:

I am dress negro on the estate (that is, hospital negro)<sup>242</sup> ... last Sunday a negro Court was employed as a carpenter by the driver's wife to do some work, he was paid in rum with which he got drunk

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<sup>239</sup> The plantation belonged to the heirs of John Brown of London, (PB1, Vryberg).

<sup>240</sup> The wording and nature of Mr. Chisholme's correspondence on the complaint of Gasper marks it out as one from an educated and sensitive man, though somewhat bizarre and inappropriately effusive, (CB2, 20 November 1825). Within a year Chisholme was replaced as manager of Vryburg by David Miller. He later worked for a Mr. Blair on plantation No.19, West Coast, (CB3 30 July 1827).

<sup>241</sup> Many if not most of the 'hospitals' served not only the sick but also the punished, for it was there that bed stocks were usually set up and also where any 'dark room' (used for solitary confinement) was established.

<sup>242</sup> Note inserted by clerk to the Fiscal.

and cut his leg whilst so working, he came to me to dress it. He directed me to dress the wound, I did so in manager's presence, but remarked upon the hardship of my being obliged to dress his wounds on Sunday, which he got in doing work for himself with which he got drunk. The manager heard this and ordered me to be silent or he would have me confined in the stocks, after a few words between the manager and myself he ordered me in the stocks saying in the morning he would give me a good flogging, knowing the manager to be severe and afraid of the punishment I made my escape and come to look for redress.<sup>243</sup>

The case, like so many in the Fiscal's records, had much to reveal about slave life – the trade between slaves, with the wife of the driver contracting the services of a slave carpenter to do some work for her, the payment made in rum, and Gasper's vexation at having to suffer for another's foolishness.

As fascinating as was Gasper's statement, the reply from the manager was even more intriguing. He began, as suggested above, not with any rebuttal of the charge made against him, but with a rambling discourse about the blossoms on his estate:

I did myself this pleasure on Saturday last and sent it by Tom, and on Monday I sent the coriaal to De Kinderen in expectation that you would find it convenient to come and see the blossom. The coriaal is not yet returned, but I presume you detained the people for they had orders to come home if they did not see you by six o'clock on Monday evening. The three last days have been dry if I except a very light drizzle yesterday and tho this morning threatened rain 'tis still fair but cloudy. The greater part of our blossom is open, the remainder will blow tomorrow under the sand kokers and thick plantain shade, 'tis particularly good on strong young trees but in all exposed parts and worn out trees there is very little. 'Tis by no means general even in favourable spots for many trees may be seen loaded with blossom surrounded by others on which there is scarcely a bud. On No. 14 I regret to say there is very little notwithstanding the attention paid to it last season, but if we get more rain soon both it and other old fields promise something.<sup>244</sup>

It seems to have been with a sense of profound and weary resignation that Chisholme eventually, and reluctantly, came to address Gasper's complaint:

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<sup>243</sup> CB2, 20 November 1825

<sup>244</sup> CB2, 20 November 1825

I dare say you will have now seen Gasper who started twixt two and three o'clock, since observed waiting on his honor the Fiscal. I have no idea what his complaint may be, for he locked the hospital and very deliberately walked off under my own eye, in apparent good humour but a little groggified.<sup>245</sup>

This account differs somewhat from Gasper's, but as the text below reveals,

Chisholme adds some colour to the dispute:

I beg leave to detail the circumstances which with the assistance of rum generated so extraordinary an idea in his giddy maddle<sup>246</sup>. I had been to call on Mr. Mittelholzer and on my return Gasper came up ere I had dismounted to say that Court had cut his leg and that he (Gasper) had refused to dress it. His manner and this strange confession convinced me that he had been tippling and instead of being angry with him I quietly asked his reason for refusing to perform his duty of the hospital. His answer was that Court had been the cause of putting him in the stocks lately and that he would never after oblige Court.<sup>247</sup>

Unfortunately we are not told of the circumstances by which Court had been able to have Gasper punished in the stocks. Nevertheless, we know that the two men were more consumed by animosity for each other than by any ill feelings they had for the manager, who had ordered them to be punished.

Chisholme then explained to the Fiscal how Gasper rationalised his refusal to do perform his duty as nurse on Court. Because Court "had hired himself out on Sunday and did not cut his leg at his master's work or on the lawful day, ergo he was not entitled to have his wound dressed."<sup>248</sup> Gasper believed that he was only obliged to perform his work as nurse on those injured while doing plantation work, and not work performed on one's own behalf. Chisholme continued:

To this reasoning was added a declaration that no body could force him (Gasper) to attend the hospital on Sunday, that he would not attend it regularly in future, tho sometime he would "do half-half for

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<sup>245</sup> CB2, 20 November 1825

<sup>246</sup> Maddle = crazy, confusion of mind. Not normally a noun as it is here used.

<sup>247</sup> CB2, 20 November 1825

<sup>248</sup> CB2, 20 November 1825 (underline by the Fiscal's clerk).



good heart for massa"! All this was said in perfect good humour and in the same spirit I accompanied him to the hospital.<sup>249</sup>

Gaspar was establishing his right not to have to work on a Sunday, unless he felt inclined to do so, and then only as a favour to the manager. The tone of sarcasm in Chisholme's statement about Sunday work suggests that he did not share Gaspar's understanding of the slave code relating to Sunday work, at least as it pertained to hospital nurses. This is not verified anywhere in the documents, though it may well have been the case, as emergency workers to this day are generally exempted from regulations controlling the days employers can expect a person to work.

The manager's subordinated role in the dispute between the two slaves is illustrated by Chisholme's account of the events that followed their return to the hospital:

While dressing the wound I had difficulty in preventing Court and him from fighting. I threatened to switch both of them and it was not until I asked young Anthony to let me have the carracarra with which he was passing at the moment, that they ceased bickering. Gaspar will not say that I even brandished it over him.<sup>250</sup>

The wording suggests that Chisholme himself dressed Court's wound, or at least they did it together, though how Gaspar could be simultaneously dressing Court's wound and fighting with him is hard to imagine. Chisholme challenged Gaspar to say that he threatened, let alone used, violence. But violence against him was not likely to have been Gaspar's major concern. Gaspar's assistance dressing the wound of an enemy was a far more humiliating experience for Gaspar, as Chisholme related:

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<sup>249</sup> CB2, 20 November 1825

<sup>250</sup> CB2, 20 November 1825

The dressing finished he asked for a shovel and hoe as he had come little<sup>251</sup> in Court's eyes, I desired him go sleep. He declared he would never more be hospital nurse.<sup>252</sup>

Gaspar's request for a shovel and hoe equates to a request for demotion to field worker, indicative of both the dignity and pride he must have had in his job as nurse, and the loss of dignity he had suffered by having to dress his enemy's leg. Chisholme confirmed the status of nurse later in his statement when he said, "that I put him on a level with the drivers" and that therefore "he must do his duty in the hospital".<sup>253</sup>

I told him we'd settle that in the morning. 'Better give me pass massa. Go put Court's foot in the stocks.' 'Let he come well first' said I. 'That pa' me can't do massa.' 'Me too can't gi'e you pass Gasper.' 'Me sa go without.' 'Very well go, good bye hearie.' 'Good bye massa.' And with that he set off with an air which amused many of the people who were looking at him with amusement.<sup>254</sup>

To save face Gaspar demanded that Court be punished, or else he would have to go to town to complain. Chisholme reasonably declined Gaspar's demand to lock up Court, at least until the man's leg had healed. Gaspar went without the pass, and without much dignity too, considering that several of his own community were watching and thought the episode amusing. Chisholme claimed that the "drivers wished to bring him back" and that he would not allow it. To support his account of the episode he told the Fiscal that "I shall be glad to send any negroes as evidence which his honor may require". This statement demonstrates an interesting example of how the 'moral economy' of the community seemed to have included the manager. It also shows that Chisholme recognised this moral economy to be able to

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<sup>251</sup> To 'come little' is a creole expression meaning to be demeaned.

<sup>252</sup> CB2, 20 November 1825

<sup>253</sup> CB2, 20 November 1825

<sup>254</sup> CB2, 20 November 1825.

validate his actions at an official level. At the same time Chisholme called upon the official authority from the Fiscal to inform Gasper that he could not “expect such employment as his peculiar whims may render it convenient for him to ask”.<sup>255</sup>

There was no suggestion that Gasper had been unhappy at his job. The dispute centred on Gasper’s control over his work, and his ‘right’ to treat only those he thought deserving. In many ways the manager was immaterial to the dispute, which, as much as anything else, was provoked by Gasper to support his standing within his own community. For Gasper the case was about status and face on the estate. He felt demeaned by the episode, he had ‘come little’ in the eyes of his enemy, and the whole affair had been played out before the scrutiny of his community. Like most managers, and many observers of slavery, Chisholme probably underestimated Gasper’s self esteem, and no doubt thought that the issue was not worth fighting over. Chisholme’s deposition was prefixed with the comment that Gasper’s concerns amounted to no more than an “extraordinary ... idea in his giddy muddle”. His tone throughout suggests that he felt the case to have been a monumental waste of his time.

Chisholme’s primary appeal to the Fiscal centred on his ability to direct the employment of his workers where he thought it necessary, regardless of their sensibilities. Though medical training at this time was haphazard and rudimentary, it was not unskilled, and some time was required for a manager to find a person suitable for medical work and then to train him or her for that position. As in the case of Jimmy and Terlet, it was not a simple matter for manager's to find the right kind of worker for the right job. This was perhaps another limitation of slavery. The

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<sup>255</sup> CB2, 20 November 1825

workforce of a plantation owner was more or less fixed, the trouble and expense of changing workers was very much more problematic than for employers of paid workers who could be sacked and replaced. With a limited pool of expertise within a plantation, to have the only well qualified person refuse to do the only job he was suited for would represent a double blow for a manager. Moreover, as slaves represented capital and a 'means of production', they had to be economically utilised, so that, if a slave worker became uncooperative, not only did production suffer but so too did the return on one's capital investment. Gasper's petulant threat to quit his job as nurse on principle would have been as much of a nuisance to Chisholme's administration as to Gasper's status, especially if his stand on principle had eventually been recognised by other members of the plantation community. So Chisholme would have been reluctant to call his bluff on such a matter, cognisant of Gasper's pride and his subsequent ability to cut off his nose to spite his face, or, more significantly, to stand up for his principles regardless of the consequences.

Vocational advancement was closely allied to material advancement. Such advancement could affect status and self esteem in several ways. First, there was a symbolic quality to exclusive positions, which indicated rare and valued skills, and qualities recognised by an external authority. This of course had to be balanced by the potential sacrifice of the companionship offered by communal work. More significant perhaps were the opportunities exclusive positions offered to further the material aspirations of workers and their kin. Occasionally, certain positions, such as that of punt men, offered greater freedom of movement and control over working hours. These positions afforded lengthy periods free from managerial observation, and hence the opportunity of engaging in profitable activities along the way. Those

slaves trained for skilled professions, such as blacksmiths, carpenters, coopers, etc., also gained the opportunity to provide these skills in their own time for payment. Indeed, there were numerous ways slaves could advance themselves within the slave system, materially benefiting both themselves and their kin, through the agency of management, either directly by ingratiation, or indirectly by promotion. There were naturally advantages and disadvantages to a close association with management, but provided care was taken not to disturb community standings, the rewards were there for those willing and able to pursue them.

Table 3.3 provides figures for slave occupations at the end of the slave era (the only period for which figures are available), but it is unlikely these differed significantly from the occupational distribution patterns for the earlier period studied in this paper.

TABLE 3.3:  
SLAVE OCCUPATIONS 1834.<sup>256</sup>

<i>Occupations 1834</i>	
Head people	854
Tradesmen	806
Field labourers	9,902
Inferior field labourers	3,483
Head Domestics	536
Inferior Domestics	417
Children under 6	2,291
Aged, diseased, non-effective	912
<i>Total</i>	<i>19,201</i>

<sup>256</sup> Compiled from data in Higman, *Slave populations*, Table S7.1.

The ratio of senior slaves to 'inferior' and field slaves gives some indication of the numbers involved. Nearly 16 percent of working slaves in Berbice, therefore, held prestigious jobs.<sup>257</sup> Considering that the vast majority of these were men, and that most of these men had wives and children, then the figure for those slaves having the benefit of a prestigious job, either directly or indirectly, would be even higher, certainly enough to have created a kind of slave 'middle class', with all the attendant value systems and conformity characteristic of that group in other societies. The strategy of promotion and advancement within slavery certainly afforded the slave better prospects of success than any strategies which avoided slavery. Moreover, a prestigious job could be the first step on the road to what was, in theory, the ultimate slave advancement within Berbice society – manumission and independence.

Vocational issues are interesting because they relate to the fine detail of how managers and slaves negotiated working conditions on the plantations. It is clear that slaves would protest against instances of infraction of established work conditions, or where they felt that managers and overseers were being unreasonable in their demands or expected slaves to work with inadequate tools and equipment. Work practices affected all the workers on an estate, so that a poor manager's decisions could make the work slaves had to do harder, and conversely poor work practices by slaves could cut efficiency and increase the amount of labour required to complete each task. On the other hand we have seen that slaves could take pride in their work and resent undue interference in the way they went about that work. Most importantly, however, vocational issues which were raised between slaves and

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<sup>257</sup> From Table 3.3 discounting those 6 and under, as well as a further 2,000 which would conservatively estimate those under 12 (and not ready for prestigious jobs) and discounting those 'aged, diseased and ineffective', we are left with a total of 13,998 slaves of whom 2,196 occupied prestigious jobs, or 15.69 percent.

managers show that slaves' concerns over the conditions of their labour transcended the bare fundamentals of plantation work and extended into areas of greater complexity than has often been recognised.

### **Unjust punishment in relation to work**

When assembling the data from the records, excessive or unjust punishment grievances were further divided into those which related primarily to work, and those which were more connected to social or personal issues, and the figures reveal that a slight majority of these grievances were work related (about 56 percent).<sup>258</sup>

Excessive or unjust punishment grievances were most commonly associated with one or more other grievances – typically, a particular grievance would result in punishment, thereby aggravating the sense of injustice felt by the slave. When France on plantation Ma Retraite stated simply to the Fiscal, “I consider I am improperly and undeservingly punished and therefore came to complain”,<sup>259</sup> he was stating a position that most slaves in Berbice would have agreed with. Slaves were keenly aware of what constituted justifiable punishment, and would complain if they felt aggrieved. Protest could even follow the mere threat of an unjust punishment, as in the case of George working on the farm Goldspice, owned and managed by R. Grant. George, having been threatened with a flogging, absconded from his work and went to the Fiscal to complain. As with many cases involving unjust punishment, other issues also surfaced in the process, and while before the Fiscal

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<sup>258</sup> 192 grievances were work related (ECU), and 153 were socially related (SPU).

<sup>259</sup> CB2, 31 March 1825.

George thought to add some other grievances which he may never have proffered had the fear of unjustified punishment not prompted him to go to town to complain.

George, who was watchman over the plantain walk outlined his case:

[F]rom the great scarcity of grass owing to the heavy dry season, the cattle from the neighbouring farms come to the plantain walk, with great exertion he continues to keep them out in the day time, but it is impossible for him to do so at night. My master hearing cows came in the walk wanted to flog me, I got alarmed and hid myself and got to town. Since leaving my master went into the house where I live and took away a cock, two hens and twenty three chickens I had. He has not given me a hat nor jacket.<sup>260</sup>

In defence, the owner/manager made his reply and

states that the complaint is without the least foundation of truth. That complainant is an infirm negro and consequently unable to be watchman of a plantain walk, that his walk is enclosed with a good bamboo hedge, to keep the cattle out which is highly necessary and without which the walk could not be kept up as he himself has a great flock of cattle. That there is an opening quite close to the complainant's house which he was directed to keep closed during the day to prevent cattle coming in. The complainant is put in the walk to mind and rear fowls for him the proprietor but altho stationed there for some very considerable time he has never reared one for him, the proprietor. That a regular watchman is put every night to guard the plantain walk and the complainant never thought of as one capable or sufficiently trustworthy to be made a watchman. That a calf lately met with some accident which he the proprietor ordered to be killed and shared out to the negroes. Some days afterwards going to the plantain walk he saw on the Barbricut of complainant a quantity of fresh meat and a foot of a cow, which he was curing by smoke. Proprietor enquired of complainant's wife where he had got the foot from. She replied it is part of the allowance of the cow shared out. Proprietor stated the impossibility of this as the one he ordered be killed and distributed was a calf and that the foot is of a much larger animal. He intended to make some inquiry as numerous herds of cattle from the neighbouring farms came to his place to procure water. This no doubt alarmed complainant and he left the property and walked to town a distance of 25 miles and when on the estate he is considered unable to perform the least work. 14 days after complainant absented himself he learnt that he had gone to complain and he then enforced a regulation established on the farm that any negro going to complain to the Fiscal if his complaint was unfounded and judged so by the Fiscal that he would secure what property he could to answer the expense of investigation and he therefore took the

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<sup>260</sup> CB2, 22 December 1824.



cocks and hens and chickens which he was ready to return if the complaint was founded otherwise he considered himself entitled to retain the same. ... Adds that the jacket complainant now had on was one he received with the other slaves.<sup>261</sup>

As usual, the plethora of circumstantial detail makes it difficult to tease out the real issues at play in this dispute. On balance it seems that George, fearing punishment, had sought to circumvent this by making a complaint to the Fiscal. Whether George had killed the neighbour's cow or not will never be known, though it would seem a little greedy if George had indeed a "great flock of cattle" of his own. We learn from the owner that George was infirm and at the end of his useful working life, not even capable of being a watchman. George not only does not mention this, but even suggests that his job was both real and valuable, and only frustrated in its execution by the impossibility of working day and night to keep out the starving cattle from nearby plantations. It is strange then that while George made no claim of infirmity it was the manager who questioned how George was able to walk the 25 miles to town in his condition, even though it appears to have taken about 14 days, a leisurely pace indeed. Nevertheless, the manager's case was substantially upheld, perhaps reflecting the Fiscal's sympathy for a fellow slave owner stuck with a slave no longer capable of performing useful work, but very capable of causing costly problems for his owner. In any case the punishment was reduced on application from the manager, who did not entirely escape admonishment from the Fiscal who

represented to Mr. Grant that he disapproved of the arrangement made by him with respect to indemnifying himself for costs incurred by his slaves complaining to which he replied that it was meant merely an inducement to prevent slaves quitting his place without applying to

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<sup>261</sup> CB2, 22 December 1824.

him for a pass to do so. He never contemplated appropriating himself their property.<sup>262</sup>

The attempt by the proprietor to have the slave pay the costs which were levied against the owners informs us of several factors. Firstly that for such a practice to have had any meaning for the slaves, they must surely have had, on average, sufficient funds to cover these costs. If many of the slaves were destitute then the owner's threat would have been useless. Secondly, that the cost of the complaint process represented a significant burden to management. And thirdly, that this practice was not permitted by the authorities, who confirmed that proprietors had to bear the entire expense of a slave's legal action. In the end, George received the punishment he had feared getting – but perhaps his sense of injustice had been somewhat placated by his fortnight's holiday, the return of his fowls, and having compelled the owner to pay the Fiscal for the privilege of inflicting the unjust punishment.

One practice disliked by slaves was punishment which was not only unjust, but also the result of passion – something increasingly disapproved of within the colony.<sup>263</sup> Such was the position of Goodluck in New Amsterdam:

Fiscal I come to show you here my Master beat me about the head and face last night. I am ostler, and cut grass in the trenches for the home – last night after gun fire I served the house with grass, locked the gate, put the key in the kitchen and went to sleep in my room in the yard about ten o'clock master came down stairs, Mr. Hewitt was with master he was to sleep there, he found the gate open, master came to me, woke me and asked how the gate came open, I said I do not know

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<sup>262</sup> CB2, 22 December 1824.

<sup>263</sup> For example, Mr. Forsyth the proprietor of the slave Dick "was severely cautioned" by the Fiscal "to restrict his manager from ill treating the negroes" was told that "if the slightest evidence was brought forward in support of complainant's charge an inquiry should have been instituted before the court" (CB2, 17 December 1824); and in court the Fiscal clearly outline the law as he saw it that "the Law of the Land and the Ordinances of the legislation of this Colony make and provided for the safety of the slave Population strictly prohibit the indulgence of wrath and anger towards slaves", (CJ2, pp. 504 – 505).

the servant in the house I suppose has opened it and gone out, he began to beat me with his fist all about my face struck me on my head and cut one and reduced me to the state you now see me in.<sup>264</sup>

The face and lips of the negro very much swollen from the blows a slight wound on the head near the temple not severely. Complainants shirt quite torn. Result. C. D. Lisle expressed his sincere regret for having allowed his passion to get the better of him and by reason declared the house servant was not in fault the gate was left open through complainant's negligence, he had often been cautioned on the subject. It appearing however evident that Mr. Lisle had punished his servant in an unwarrantable manner and contrary to the court's ordinance the fine proscribed by the said ordinance was demanded of him, the costs of inquiry be paid. Fine *f*300 Costs *f*84.<sup>265</sup>

The colony was becoming less sympathetic to owners and managers who punished slaves arbitrarily, or spontaneously. As the new slave ordinances of 1826 made it illegal to corporally punish slaves immediately following an alleged offence, and prohibited management from carrying whips, it is reasonable to suppose that by 1824 social tolerance of arbitrary punishments was already on the wane. In many ways this reflected shifting perspectives on punishment regimes throughout the empire at this time – with an ever greater emphasis placed on the clinical application of the letter of any applicable laws, and for all concerned to avoid any personalisation of the process.<sup>266</sup> This is reflected in Lisle's recognition of his error – not so much to inflict a punishment for the slave's negligence, but to have done so emotionally and spontaneously. This was also clearly recognised by slaves, who knew that

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<sup>264</sup> CB2, 30 March 1824.

<sup>265</sup> CB2, 30 March 1824.

<sup>266</sup> Chapter Seven takes an in depth look at relative punishment regimes.

punishment was reasonable for some offences, but did not hesitate to bring an action when they felt it was wrongfully or passionately applied.<sup>267</sup>

Individual slaves could be particularly affected when a manager or overseer took some kind of deep seated dislike for them. A personality clash for such slaves could obviously result in an ongoing and relentless persecution with disastrous consequences for the slave who had little hope of changing his or her workplace or management except by escape. Such was the situation for Dick on plantation Kilcoy, when the manager, D. Fraser, took a dislike to him:

I come to complain of my master for locking me up on the stocks and flogging me without a cause. I do my work and he has no complaint against me. He troubles me too much. He was very good before but not now. I do not know what it comes from. I am a ginner and as I did not give as much as the others I was flogged. I was also put to make rollers and that did not please him.<sup>268</sup>

The same kind of problem could also affect a slave with an ongoing personality clash with a particular driver, such as Hero on plantation Kilcoy.

I have story with the driver. Driver trouble and lick me in the field. I had a pain in my stomach, driver told me to carry water for the negroes to drink, I told him give me row, if I do not carry it, the trouble for me but I am not able to carry the tub. He sent to call four negro men to hold me, one named Fortune, Joney, Dick and Sharp held me down on the ground driver then licked me until the blood came out. I got up and wanted to take a hoe to work, driver told me not to put my hand on that hoe, I then said I will go to the massa in town to go complain, I mean you, I never came to complain before, if they want to sell me let them do so, this is all I have to say.<sup>269</sup>

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<sup>267</sup> For example Frederick on Rotterdam knew that he deserved punishment, he just did not want to be punished with the stocks, and had told the manager, "I know I have deserved punishment therefore give it to me" (CB2, 28 December 1825). Also Willem on New Forest recognized that a punishment was warranted for a particular offence, only that he was not the one to have committed it and thus could not tolerate "bearing the punishment another deserves" (CB2, 1 May 1824).

<sup>268</sup> CB2, 29 March 1825.

<sup>269</sup> CB2, 25 August 1825

A slave with strong community support was perhaps less likely to suffer from persecution from an individual manager, overseer or driver. Where such community support was lacking, then seeking remedy from the 'neutral' authority of the colonial officials would have been an attractive option. Moreover if the slave lacked community support then the loss of community relations from a change of plantation would not have affected the slave unduly and so such slaves often sought to be sold.

Complaints of unjust punishment represent a clear sign that slaves understood that customary and legal limitations were placed on a manager's rights to arbitrarily punish the slaves in their charge. That slaves took action to seek redress from punishments which were deemed by them to be unjust also supports the notion that slaves had placed some faith in the judicial process.

### **Health problems**

One of the more persistent personal work problems brought before the colonial officials was in relation to health. The number of personal complaints primarily concerning health issues is significant. From Table 3.2 we find that more than 63 health grievances were expressed by individual complainants, second only in number to excessive punishment. Sickness or disability among slave workers involved some complex issues for managers and workers alike. Many forms of illness or disability were difficult to establish, and the fear many managers had was that claims of ill health were used by slaves to avoid work. Regardless of any humanitarian concerns (and let us not think that slave holders were universally able to expunge such

sentiments) being too tough on claims of ill health risked a more serious illness developing, or the possibility of a temporary disability becoming a permanent one, which could easily reduce a slave's value to almost nothing. For example Coffy on plantation Rotterdam was punished by the manager Mr. Lintz for "disobedience of orders in not going to the hospital when sick but remained in the field till he got seriously ill".<sup>270</sup> Serious illness threatened the owner with the possibility of incurring a total loss of asset, a loss compounded by the necessity of having to buy a replacement in a slave colony where slaves became rarer each year.

Most slaves preferred to live healthily than to foster some illness or disability to avoid work. For example Apollo on plantation Sandvoort was curiously punished for wanting to return to work: "I was confined in the hospital, having a sore on my leg; I was there three months; I felt myself better; the manager being from home, I asked the overseer to let me go to my work; he neither replied yes or no. Next afternoon I went to work," for which Apollo was punished with a flogging.<sup>271</sup> Where there was a choice between work or disability, slaves most often chose work. Nevertheless there were a few workers who were prepared to forge a career from infirmity, such as Judy on Providence of whom the manager complains: "It is her way, that whenever the work is getting a little more than general she gets her sores open to keep her from working". Similarly, the case of Sidney, who first "came to complain that his arm was swollen; it appeared that he had tied it up very tight with a piece of string; I cut the string, finding the swelling occasioned from the tying, I put him in the stocks. ...

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<sup>270</sup> PB1, Rotterdam 2 June 1827.

<sup>271</sup> CB1, 25 October 1823.

I found him in the barraba, complaining of belly ache; I directed him home".<sup>272</sup>

Nearly 6 percent of all slave grievances related to health, but it would be difficult from this distance to judge which of those cases were genuine and which were not.

The case of Hudson highlights this difficulty. He came to the Fiscal on 26 May 1825 and lodged a complaint against the manager and the attorney of plantation Phoenix. He stated that "years ago I had fits, in Mr. Leighton's time, my hand came dead and therefore I cannot do full days work".<sup>273</sup> He had initially represented his complaint to the manager:

Some time ago I went to the manager and said my hand hurts me, he looked at it and told me to put cow dung poultice. I did so, two days after he told me I must go to work. I said I could not, he had me locked up in the stocks both feet and said I should stop there for six nights. Every morning the manager sent me out to work.<sup>274</sup>

Hudson then took his grievance to the attorney. The Fiscal often instructed slaves that complaints should in the first instance be brought to the attention of their manager, next to their attorney, and only then to officials of the colony. Hudson had pursued this course, but without success:

I told the attorney my left hand was bad and still the manager insisted on my doing full work, attorney said manager wrote him I was lazy and he sent me home. I told him I had come to him to look for redress and that on my return the manager laid me down and flogged me.<sup>275</sup>

Hudson then decided to take his complaint to the Fiscal because, far from being offered redress, he "got flogged by the manager for going to complain to the attorney".

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<sup>272</sup> CB1, 27 March 1821.

<sup>273</sup> CB2, 26 April 1825

<sup>274</sup> CB2, 26 April 1825

<sup>275</sup> CB2, 26 April 1825

William Campbell, the attorney, responded to the charges. He confirmed that Hudson had fits “about seven years ago” after which Hudson claimed his hand had become lame, which the attorney attributed to “some slight paralytic stroke”. He informed the Fiscal that as a consequence Hudson was “employed with the women and never with the men”. He added, however, that Hudson was usually a good worker and that “no negro ... carries his row better than [Hudson] when he is inclined”.<sup>276</sup> But Campbell disputed the claim that Hudson had come to him because of his hand:

A week ago he came to me to complain against the manager who troubled him for his work which he had not been able to finish in consequence of having no plantains. I was not at home at the time he came, on my return I found the report of the estate from which it appeared that plantains were purchased from No. 16 and is customary two bunches to each working negro served. This at once convinced me that he was endeavouring to deceive me and I sent him back directing the manager to give him a few lashes and lock him up for a few nights. At the same time informing him that if there was the least cause to induce me to consider he had been wronged I would have given him redress. In three days after his return he quitted the estate to come to you to complain.<sup>277</sup>

It would have been difficult for the attorney to offer redress for a punishment he had himself ordered. The attorney does not offer any reason why a lack of plantains would have caused Hudson not to complete his task, or how such a complaint could have been designed to deceive him. He then made a lengthy statement about the procurement of plantains and the difficulty posed by the recent dry weather. Only at the end of this does he refer again to Hudson's complaint, and he now “recollects hearing Hudson say his hand was swelled but he could not perceive it”. It appears that Hudson had indeed come to complain of his hand, which casts doubt on the

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<sup>276</sup> CB2, 26 April 1825

<sup>277</sup> CB2, 26 April 1825



claim that he had attempted deception. The attorney finished his statement by adding that Hudson “can work a shovel, but can work with the hoe as good as any”.<sup>278</sup>

The Fiscal was unmoved by Hudson’s complaint which he “considered to be an idle tale”. He examined Hudson’s hand but “no swelling appeared” and so Hudson was ordered to be flogged for bringing an unfounded complaint.<sup>279</sup> It was equally probable that Hudson was either genuinely disabled or fit enough to work productively, but this was something that only Hudson could have known.<sup>280</sup> Hudson made no further complaints, and the plantation is not included in subsequent punishment records.<sup>281</sup>

The well being of individuals is closely related to their health and the opportunity to rest and recuperate when ill, and thus to be given time off work when sick. The financial well being of a plantation was closely related to maximising the productive hours of work from the available workforce. From the records, though 63 complainants complained of health problems which affected their ability to work, this is by no means a large number of people from a population of over 19,000 over a period of 9 years. From the perspective of management, minimizing production losses due to claims of ill health required careful judgment and an ability to recognise genuine sickness. Given the higher mortality rates of Berbice, and hence the high level of sicknesses experienced by slaves, it seems most plantations were able to manage sickness and work to the satisfaction of slaves and managers.

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<sup>278</sup> CB2, 26 April 1825

<sup>279</sup> Slaves were expected to only bring actions which the Fiscal deemed valid, rather than actions the slaves considered valid.

<sup>280</sup> CB2, 26 April 1825

<sup>281</sup> Punishment returns were compulsory, and the most probable explanation for a plantation to disappear from the records was that the plantation either closed down, amalgamated or changed its name. In this case the other details of the plantation do not match any subsequent new plantation.

## Close

The work complaints covered in the last two chapters do not encompass the full range of slave concerns relating to their work, but merely represent the type and style of slave grievances and illustrate the complex nature of slave workers' lives. It is possible to squeeze any or all of these complaints into a matrix of resistance to and struggle against slavery in general – possible, but not entirely valid. Most of the disputes centred on particular issues on particular estates under the control of particular managers. Though all the slaves in the colony dreamed to be free of their obligations as slaves, they equally recognised that while they were slaves they had to tolerate a certain range of work demands from their owners. They were able to negotiate and ameliorate these demands to a greater degree than has often been described in other slave holding societies. The bottom line for owners was the profitable operation of the plantation and the maintenance of their assets. The details of the issues beyond those bottom lines were open to a degree of negotiation. By the time we encounter the Fiscal's documents in 1819 the slaves, managers and officials of Berbice had already established many work practices and customs, and many of the disputes which followed centred on changes by both slaves and managers to those established practices. Slaves protested when acceptable work practices were threatened or if they saw conditions on other estates improving.

With easy and open access to a complaint process, work disputes could be said to have occurred only when there was some grievance to dispute. One of the more important pieces of information we can gather from the Fiscal's records was that, for a majority of the time, a majority of workplaces were free of widespread discontent. To believe otherwise would require some evidence to suggest that slaves were either

reluctant to complain or were prevented from doing so. The evidence, however, indicates that neither were slaves reluctant to bring complaint actions nor management capable of preventing slaves from leaving the estates to go to town to complain (or go to the bush if they preferred).

The workplace issues most commonly disputed, by both manager and worker, related to the overall workload expected of workers on a particular estate and the overall time they had to spend at their work. These issues were shared by most workers and thus accounted for the largest number of disputes brought by groups of slaves. But while the general conditions of work were important to how slaves viewed their workplaces, there were many other considerations to life on plantations. Plantations were not just workplaces, but also homes and centres of recreation for all the workers on the estates, slave and free. Unhappy workplaces resulted in unhappy communities, and so the effects of work disputes could, and often did, spill over to envelope a worker's entire environment. Conversely, a workplace able to foster cohesive and supportive community relations may have been better able to cope with arduous work practices. In this way, the workplace and the community cannot be easily separated, with each having affected the other. Within the framework of work schedules workers needed to support lives outside their work and in the next two chapters that area of their lives will be reviewed.

## Chapter 4: Social Life in Berbice 1

### Preamble

Betsey would have had few other pedestrians to contend with on main street, New Amsterdam, as she walked home from chapel. It was a Sunday, and past eleven o'clock, so most people were at home.<sup>282</sup> As she walked she may well have hummed a hymn learned from the missionary, John Wray,<sup>283</sup> and could enjoy the view of the Canje river snatched between the narrow wooden houses on their quarter acre lots. Even where the river was obscured by the foliage that surrounded each house, she could admire the exotic gardens and the orderly plots of domestic vegetables. She might have smiled occasionally at those she recognised from the households, who sat out the heat of the midday sun on galleries which ran either side of their houses, the jalousies flung open to catch river breezes – breezes so slight they hardly curled the edges of the troolie leaf thatch which protected the few remaining Dutch homes from the sun and rain, but not, unfortunately, the insects.<sup>284</sup>

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<sup>282</sup> Sundays in Berbice, as elsewhere in Christian colonies, was nominally a day of rest. Eleven o'clock marked the beginning of the long midday break for most inhabitants of Berbice.

<sup>283</sup> By the mid 1820's the London Missionary Society operated a chapel in New Amsterdam with John Wray as the missionary. John Wray had previously been missionary in Demerara, and had been replaced by the fateful John Smith, who was held responsible for the 1823 Demerara slave uprising. According to David Power (Protector of Slaves) it was "well attended by the negroes" (CB3, Report to Earl Bathurst 21 January 1827). Plantation management were always wary of the LMS after it featured so prominently in the Demerara uprising of 1823.

<sup>284</sup> Dutch houses in New Amsterdam were often thatched with troolie leaves, which kept the houses cool and airy, but harboured numerous insects, and so most British houses "may be distinguished by being shingled". For a description of the typical town houses on their ¼ acre lots see Bollingbroke, *A voyage to Demerary* pp.111-112.

Betsey had reason that day to be cheerful. She was with child to a new man, maybe this time a man with a future. Such was her good mood that when she saw her ex-husband John coming toward her she did not alter her stride or check her pace, but walked forward confidently. By his gait and general demeanour she recognised him to be drunk, a common enough condition for John. She had done with his nonsense, however, and though she was not afraid, she hoped they could pass each other in the street without altercation. But John Williams was not about to let that happen.

“I hear you pregnant,” he said accosting her, “Who de father?”

Betsey turned on John, and her good mood darkened beneath her osnaburg shift.<sup>285</sup>

“You can kiss my ass John Williams.”<sup>286</sup>

In reply, John Williams knocked Betsey to the ground. Betsy managed to gain her feet and they fought and swore at each other until Harriet, who was on her way to work, intervened and parted them.<sup>287</sup>

Such altercations were not uncommon in New Amsterdam, and the few streets and alleyways played host to a great deal of public theatre. In the main, small attention would have been given the fracas by neighbouring residents, no less so than the patrons of the two public taverns. Both were situated on the river side of the street, where often a game of billiards would be in progress. The players were

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<sup>285</sup> Osnaburg cloth was used by slaves to make their clothes, and was part of an expected allowance from slave owners.

<sup>286</sup> Conversation as reported by John William (CB3, 9 April 1827).

<sup>287</sup> CB3, 9 April 1827. John William would later attack another girl Rebecca when she went to “a quarterly ball given last night by the white people”. John William “threw her down stairs, and then trampled upon her” which so traumatised Rebecca that she later was “unable to speak or move”. The matter was treated seriously, and that night roused the Fiscal, the Deputy Protector of Slaves, and the Governor, and dienaars were sent to arrest John William, (CB3, 11 July 1827).

mostly managers in town on estate business, the occasional visitors to the colony, or young overseers like George McDonald and William Scott, who would come to town to break the monotony of plantation life, relax, enjoy some light entertainment, and discuss their problems free from the cavillous ears of their managers. George had been having a hard time controlling the slaves on plantation Philadelphia, and far from enjoying the authority of an overseer, and any rewards he might have expected from the female slaves under his charge, he had endured laughter and ridicule from the estate women.<sup>288</sup> On plantation Waterloo William Scott had trouble not so much with the women, but with the men.<sup>289</sup> They may have consoled each other as they played, and planned an evening that would make the most of their night in town by engaging in some serious debauchery,<sup>290</sup> for who knew how long their young lives would last in that place.<sup>291</sup>

Street disturbances were often quickly resolved, and after the combatants had left the scene of conflict, the dust would settle back on the street, and the rest of the

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<sup>288</sup> On plantation Philadelphia the female slave Charlotte was punished by the manager for "abusing Mr. McDonald overseer in the field while doing his duty, holding him up to ridicule to the other negroes & exciting them to disobey his orders". The female slave Stella was punished by the manager for "disobeying orders of Mr. McDonald overseer, refusing to take her task of work pointed out by said overseer" (PB1, Philadelphia, 28 December 1826).

<sup>289</sup> The male slaves Adam and Liberty on plantation Waterloo punished for "disrespectful conduct" (PB1, Waterloo, 29 November 1826).

<sup>290</sup> According to Dalton the life of an overseer in Berbice was not a happy one and often leaving "a home of civilisation, perhaps comfort, commenced life in this country as an overseer". He would work "far away in the back lands, on the verge of untrodden forests; exposed to the burning sun or tempestuous rain," and would too often break the "monotony of the day's occupation was too often varied by the excitement of a night's carousal, which, often renewed, laid the seeds of future disease, or hurried him to an untimely grave." His only society was the "house of the manager, ... and here he was oftener treated as an outcast than as a friend or equal," and more usually "brother overseers on the same or neighbouring plantations." Dalton, *The history of British Guiana* pp.330-331.

<sup>291</sup> The death rate of British immigrants was high in the West Indies, though it would probably have improved from the time of Thomas Thistlewood. When he emigrated to Jamaica in 1750, he was told by a doctor on his arrival that "out of upwards of 150 passengers, brought over by Capt Bonds abt 16 months ago, 122 are dead", (Thomas Thistlewood's Diary in 37 volumes in Monson MSS, Lincoln County Record Office, England. Monson 31/1-37, one volume per year) (Hereafter: TTD), 24 April 1750, p. 289.

town would ease back into its usual lazy Sunday afternoon repose. A day spent in pursuit of whatever took one's fancy – whether it was drink or worship, family reunion or sexual liaison, hanging out with friends and neighbours or venturing to new parts and encountering new people, having fun or doing business. An afternoon passed by most in their own way and in their own time. Though New Amsterdam represented just a fraction of the population of the colony, the inhabitants were responsible for much of the culture, customs and character of Berbice.<sup>292</sup> Gone were the days of African migration, and even Europeans would now come only to work, while those whites who remained would meld or die. Though there remained a majority of the adult population who had been born in Africa, most had been culturally creolised by the 1820s, and the colony had settled into a relatively stable society.<sup>293</sup> It would be some time before the next wave of immigrants would come and throw their strong cultural traditions into the mix, but that would be later, and they would come not from Europe or Africa, but from India.<sup>294</sup> For the moment, however, the colony was established, and social behaviour had been normalised and customised, though influenced and moderated as ever by the wider world. The main focus of its social development would come from the population within, from the inhabitants and the customs they developed, and the relationships they formed.

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<sup>292</sup> In 1819 there were just 82 slaves listed as resident in New Amsterdam, though the same data reveal that the residence of 4,523 slaves was unknown (unstated). Many more slaves, however, would have periodically visited New Amsterdam. (Higman, *Slave Populations*, Table S1.14, p.425).

<sup>293</sup> Britain prohibited the slave trade by law in early 1808, so by the 1820s most would have been in the colony a dozen years or more.

<sup>294</sup> After the apprenticeship scheme ended in 1838, immigrants were encouraged from many areas to bolster the shortage of labour as former slaves left the plantations for village cooperatives. Figures for immigrants to British Guiana highlight the diversity, with Portuguese numbering 31,000 (1841-1882), African 14,060 (1841-1863), Barbadians 40,656 (1835-1893), Chinese 15,720 (1853-1913), and the Indians 238,000 (1847-1917), (Toto Mangar, "Conceptualisation and history of the Guianas", in Henry Jeffrey and Jack Menke, (eds.), *Problems of development of the Guianas*, Anton de Kom University of Suriname, 1985, pp.16-17).

## Introduction

In the previous two chapters the discussion focused on the role of work and the rationale it provided for the existence of the colony. Though work was the foundation stone of Berbice society, it did not so much define it, as provide a certain set of parameters within which it could develop. The inflexibility of an economically sustainable plantation agriculture dictated that the organisation of work had to take precedence over the private world of the colony's inhabitants, whether slave or free. Control over the private lives of workers was not unique to slaves or slavery in the early nineteenth century – masters, industrialists, landlords, whether in Africa, Europe or the New World, sought wherever possible to control and monitor the activities of their workers in as broad a way as they were able to get away with. For capitalists, control over workers' lives translated into a dependent, flexible, and powerless labour force. Nevertheless, though the slave system and its restrictions formed the basis of social organization, it was but one of many factors influencing how social behaviour manifested itself in the colony. Slavery was common to most of the population, so it was something everyone in the colony had to look past in order to relate with anyone else. Within slave society there were many other more useful and much more important social identifiers. None were more important than those associated with family – husbands and wives, sons and daughters, brothers and sisters.

As noted in previous chapters, grievances brought by slaves which were predominantly associated with non-work related issues generally received a less sympathetic response from the Fiscal or the Protector of Slaves. This was not the case, however, with those social grievances that were specifically connected to



family and sex. From Tables 4.1 and 4.2 we find that complaint actions involving the 11 sexual grievances, for example, were very often successful, and consequently these grievances averaged a low score. So too did the 33 grievances relating to the treatment of family members or kin. On the other hand the 14 grievances involving parenting issues were rather less successful, as were the 21 grievances about the separation of families.<sup>295</sup> Manumission claims, which were often brought by family members, were almost always upheld as slaves usually only brought this complaint if they were reasonably sure of their facts.

TABLE 4.1:  
OUTCOMES OF SOCIALLY RELATED COMPLAINT ACTIONS FOR SLAVE  
COMPLAINANTS (1819-1827).<sup>296</sup>

<i>Grievance</i>	<i>Outcome Score</i>
Unjust punishment socially related	2.77
General treatment and dissatisfaction	3.61
Sexually related problems	1.80
Manumission claim	1.00
Wants to change owner or residence	3.28
Wants to retain owner or residence	2.16
Other social problems	1.50
Separation from kin	2.76
Complaint about treatment of kin or friends	2.50
Parenting problems	3.00
Cultural issues	2.08
Other family or communal issues	2.46
Dispute with other slave	2.18
Dispute with free coloured person	3.00
Dispute with free white person	1.80

<sup>295</sup> Though this figure gives a somewhat misleading account of the situation. 14 of the grievances were brought in a single action involving 14 slaves who had either misunderstood the plans of their owner or had simply wished not to have to work on a plantation.

<sup>296</sup> Data assembled from CB1, CB2, CB3, January 1819 to August 1827.

TABLE 4.2:  
DISTRIBUTION OF SOCIALLY RELATED GRIEVANCES (1819-1827).<sup>297</sup>

<i>Grievance</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percentage of All Grievances</i>
Unjust punishment socially related	153	7.95%
General treatment and dissatisfaction	187	9.72%
Sexually related problems	11	0.57%
Manumission claim	2	0.10%
Wants to change owner or residence	50	2.60%
Wants to retain owner or residence	47	2.44%
Other social problems	4	0.21%
Separation from kin	21	1.09%
Complaint about treatment of kin or friends	33	1.72%
Parenting problems	14	0.73%
Cultural issues	26	1.35%
Other family or communal issues	13	0.68%
Dispute with other slave	12	0.62%
Dispute with free person	4	0.21%
Other civil dispute	7	0.36%

Table 4.3 indicates some of the negative aspects of family and sexual life as observed by the managers on the various estates. Interestingly, the offence of mistreatment of a family member attracted, on average, a rather more severe punishment from the manager, as did various sexual offences and promiscuity. Infidelity and marital problems, however, only attracted moderate punishment, but they were the most common familial offences, and as with work offences, the most common infringements typically attracted less severe punishment.

<sup>297</sup> Data assembled from CB1, CB2, CB3, January 1819 to August 1827.

TABLE 4.3  
NUMBER AND PUNISHMENT SEVERITY FOR SOCIALLY RELATED / INTERMEDIATE  
OFFENCES (1826-1827).<sup>298</sup>

<i>Offence</i>	<i>Code</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Low Severity</i>	<i>High Severity</i>
Murder, attempted murder, GBH	MM	15		2.80
Obeah, clandestine meetings, illegal dancing	MD	4	1.75	
Suicidal behaviour, self abuse, risk taking	MX	7		2.29
Refusing medical treatment	MH	64	1.95	
Abuse of family member, child	MF	31		2.10
Infidelity, marital disharmony	MI	65	1.98	
Sexual offences, promiscuity	MS	32		2.34
Riotous behaviour, drunk in free time	MR	79	1.75	
Fighting, assault	MA	227	1.67	
Out without a pass	MP	112	1.88	
Other unclassified	MO	3		2.67
Absconding, extended absence	IA	76		2.59
Encouraging others to disobey orders	IE	21		2.67
Insolence, disobedience, assault, management	II	486	1.97	
Driver not co-operating	ID	57		2.09
Resisting punishment	IR	39		2.05
Theft & related offences	IT	239		2.46
Making complaint without cause	IC	33		3.27
Encouraging others to abscond, harbouring	IH	11		2.18

More so than work related problems, problems relating to close family members and sexual liaisons do not lend themselves so readily to quantifiable analysis because of their idiosyncratic nature. The narrative of the problems is usually more illuminating when looking at more intimate issues. Discussing Berbice society in the 1820s, however, demands caution from the historian before some relatively common descriptors are used without some qualifications. Terms like ‘family’, ‘husband’, ‘wife’, ‘kin’, are loaded with meanings which do not always fit the way these very close relationships played themselves out in Berbice in the early nineteenth century. For example, the terms ‘wife’ and ‘husband’ did not always correspond to the idea of a ‘wife’ or ‘husband’ in the European tradition, and would rarely assume that context

<sup>298</sup> Data assembled from PB1, November 1826 to June 1827.

in Berbice. This chapter will look at the very close sexual relations between men and women, and the even closer relations between members of the same family.

### **Marriage, sex and offspring**

Speaking of the early slaves settled in Louisiana, Ira Berlin noted that, despite disease and despite “the sexual imbalance, some Africans formed families almost upon arrival”.<sup>299</sup> Most inhabitants in Berbice in the 1820’s had come there as single adults, slave and free. Nevertheless, as Ira Berlin found in earlier times in America, the inhabitants of Berbice quickly established connubial connexions. The complexities of these relationships frequently invest the Fiscal’s documents with a vibrancy lost in most archival records. As in all societies, the sexual relations encountered in Berbice were not universally positive or negative. Slaves knew all too well the dizzy slide from the warm embrace of rapturous love into the open arms of outright hostility – when each new learned trait of a partner repulsed rather than endeared, when even custom and propriety were powerless to mend the bitter rift. They knew too the satisfaction and support that a life long loving partner could provide. There are some touching portrayals of marital solidarity in the complaint records, and there are complaints which typify all that can go wrong within a sexual relationship. As with all aspects of the lives of slaves it would be a mistake to ascribe to slavery the lion’s share of blame for dysfunctional relationships – slaves were quite capable of making their own mistakes. While marriage formation in

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<sup>299</sup> Berlin, *Many thousands gone*, p.83.

Berbice largely sidestepped the European convention of Christianisation or official certification, that did not mean marriages did not reflect many European conventions on marriage, particularly with regard to the nuclear family. Nevertheless, officially formalised marriage in Berbice was not common. Indeed in the eight month period between 1 November 1826 and 30 June 1827 only 69 couples were given a formal license to marry. Moreover, all but one of the slave couples were married by Mr. Voss of the Lutheran Congregation and all but one couple were slaves who belonged to the Gallez family – an indication more of that family’s commitment to slave integration into Christian society than of any desire by slaves or masters in general to adopt Western conventions of legal marriage at this time.<sup>300</sup>

The reasons for the low Christian marriage rates hinge on two perspectives. First, that the European oligarchy were either indifferent to formal marriage or actively discouraged the practice. Second, that the slaves themselves were either indifferent to it or rejected the Christian model. These two are no doubt intertwined and both influences were probably responsible for the customary practices which evolved at this time in Berbice. And, as the documents reveal, though not structured along European-Christian models, marriage was nonetheless formalised by slaves and managers with rules and customary practices to regulate the relations between men and women. These practices were most likely informed by both European and African traditions.

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<sup>300</sup> CO 116/143, “List of Slaves to whom license has been granted for Marriage”. The Gallez family was largely coloured. Though the patriarch L. F. Gallez was obviously a Christian who was keen to remove slaves from sinful cohabitation, he was not above taking liberties with his own marriage, having been caught *in flagrante dilecto* with the girl Peggy by his wife just a month after these slave marriage licenses were granted his slaves (CB3, 10 July 1827).

Unfortunately, most detailed information about marriage in these particular documents relate to problems with such relationships – infidelity, promiscuity, incompatibility. This is especially true of the punishment records which only highlight disagreements between sexual partners. The punishment records were generated by plantation managers, who only remarked on those marriages experiencing difficulties. Moreover, various managers differed in their treatment of such personal problems among the people living on a plantation. Some managers felt the need to intervene in slave relationships, especially if they felt these relationships were causing problems, while other managers did not care what the slaves did in their own time and in their own homes so long as plantation business was not affected. Managers were usually employed, and away from homes to which most believed they would one day return. Consequently many of them invested little in local society beyond that which they deemed necessary for their social (and sexual) comfort, safety and prosperity.

Managers needed to run plantations so that they could generate profits for their employers. Critical to this equation was the nature of plantation ownership in Berbice, with the majority of plantations owned by absentee landlords.<sup>301</sup> The very remoteness of the ownership would naturally place greater emphasis on the contemporary success of the enterprise, measured quite simply in the dividend the investment provided each year. This need to maintain and ensure an adequate dividend drove many of the managerial and official attitudes to slave marriage and family formation. An employed manager's primary responsibility to his employer would have been to maintain plantation production, and such a manager would have

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<sup>301</sup> About 63% of all slaves belonged to offshore owned plantations, see Table 7.6 in Chapter Seven.

given his greatest attention to slave behaviour which directly affected production and the owner's commercial interests. Though the commercial interests of owners might be thought to have benefited from the long term capital gain of breeding slaves, there is little evidence to suggest that this was the case in Berbice. Moreover, financial concerns were always a little more immediate than the ten or more years needed to recoup the cost of children. While proprietors were only too well aware of the expense and value of slaves, the length of time required to rear a child slave to productive utility, and the subsequent costs involved as well as the loss of labour from the mother, would have tempered any long term financial gains. Compounding the problem for owners was the fact that not all children born made it into adulthood, so realising prime-slave value.<sup>302</sup>

With no clear directives from absentee landlords to increase slave numbers through natural increase, the exigencies of monthly production dominated managerial concern, and to this end family formation was at best tolerated. In many cases it may well have been actively discouraged, as believed by the slave Ziemine, one of ten women on plantation De Resolutie who brought a complaint to the acting Fiscal on 17 November 1823. Ziemine complained that the manager continually frustrated the slaves' efforts to raise families:

If any of the women be pregnant, no attention is paid to them; they are wrought as hard as the others; for that reason there are no children; manager says he does not come to mind children.<sup>303</sup>

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<sup>302</sup> 11.6% of children born in Berbice died within the 36 month period between 1819 and 1821. Yet many infant deaths went unreported, particularly when they occurred in the first month. Higman reports that one Doctor working in neighbouring Demerara-Essequibo claimed that half the slave children born died of tetanus. Many more would have died before reaching prime male status (Higman, *Slave populations*, pp.25-33.).

<sup>303</sup> CB1, 17 November 1823.

The more callous managers would have sought to disturb procreation as soon as it was practicable. Even managers sympathetic to their slave's familial needs would have been frustrated with the loss of production resulting from too many of the female slaves falling pregnant. Moderating such calculated commercialism by managers, however, were their own moral conceptions of marriage, fidelity and child rearing. It cannot be assumed that all managers were morally indifferent to the slave's basic human right to procreate. At the official level, the authorities could not be seen to be insensitive to the welfare of slaves, and providing slaves the opportunity to marry and rear children was fundamental to such welfare.

If foreign owners had little knowledge of, or care for, the mating habits of their slaves, then the same cannot be said of those local inhabitants committed to the colony. Mr. Linde was a mulatto creole and the owner-manager of *Vrouw Johanna*. As such he had few prospects of living anywhere else but Berbice, and so could be assumed to have his own and his society's long term interests most at heart. Even so, he could not ignore the need to maintain profitability, even at the expense of long term financial and social gain, and so failed to buy any female slaves for his all male gang.<sup>304</sup> Another local proprietor, William Cort, was even less concerned with increasing his slaveholding by natural increase. One of his slaves, Catherine, complained that she needed some time to look after her sick infant but was told by Cort that

he did not thank her for making children. She had no business to leave work to nurse her child, she ought to have waited till evening.<sup>305</sup>

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<sup>304</sup> CB2, 5 March 1825.

<sup>305</sup> CB3, 20 August 1827.



In this case the Protector of Slaves supported the proprietor, the Protector effectively saying that while it was the responsibility of estates to provide childcare, the economic needs of large estates took precedence over childrearing and thus could not be expected to indulge individual children with the attention of their mothers in time of sickness.

Whatever the economics of childrearing, interfering with the process at its inception would not have been given much consideration. The idea of somehow controlling consensual sexual congress between men and women would never have ventured beyond the normalisation of such affairs. While managers might lament the progeny of sexual connections, they did not imagine it possible to prevent the connection in the first place. Interference from management was thus limited to those connections which became problematic for the smooth running of plantation operations. The records show a marked disparity of attention given by managers to social issues such as marital problems. Complicating the issue would have been the active participation of some managers and overseers in the marital formations within plantations. The following Table 4.4 shows the distribution of marital offences among plantations:

TABLE 4.4:  
DISTRIBUTION OF MARITAL OFFENCES ON PLANTATIONS 1826 AND 1827.<sup>306</sup>

	<i>Number</i>
Number of plantations 1827	142
Number with marital related offence	33
Plantations with less than 5% of offences being marital	20
Plantations with more than 5% of offences being marital	13

<sup>306</sup> PB1.

From Table 4.4 it is clear that the majority of plantations either did not encounter marital problems worthy of punishment, or did not think that such problems were the concern of management. Marital disharmony is not likely to have varied to that degree among the different plantation communities, and so the major explanation for the different punishment regimes for such offences must largely rest on the attitude and inclinations of the various managers. For example, out of the 200 punishments recorded on plantation Union in the eight month period, none concerned marital difficulties, while out of the 40 punishments on plantation Vryberg 7 involved marital offences. Even within plantations, variations could occur which supports the image of managers driven by transient social whims. Which, unlike productivity offences, they had some discretionary powers over. For example on plantation Best Coffee Land there was just one marital problem for 240 days but then, on 7 January 1827, Hector was punished for “beating his wife in the negro yard”, Clarissa was punished for “making disturbance with her man in the negro houses” and Joe was punished for “having a cutlass in his hand & threatening to kill his wife”.<sup>307</sup>

The detail and exposition of marriage and marital customs reveal themselves in the documents in various guises, and the complaint cases which deal at any length with such affairs illustrate the complex and often contradictory aspects of local custom in Berbice. Consider the woman Mogge who came to the manager of plantation Vryheid, Mr. S. L. Rynveld, to report that “something bad” was in her house. She was ostensibly reporting a simple case of theft, and theft was the issue which drove the investigation undertaken by the Fiscal. But it is doubtful Mogge was motivated to complain by any kind of concern for the well being of the

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<sup>307</sup> PB1, Best Coffee Land 7 January 1827.

plantation on which she slaved. What motivated Mogge was a desire to be rid of her husband, Harry.<sup>308</sup> A long tradition in European, sub continental, and east Asian societies, held that the movement of a wife from her parental home to that of her husband resulted in the displacement of parental and sibling kinship by the marital bond between husband and wife. There was also a long tradition that wives or husbands did not give evidence against their partners. Mogge illustrated that neither tradition influenced her to any degree in this particular instance. Her testimony was obviously intended to give Harry, her 'husband' or her 'man', as much trouble as possible:

[I live] in the house with [my] man. He threatened to kill me, he brought some coffee in the house. I asked him where he got that thing, and what he brought it in the house for, it was bad. He cursed me and told me it was not my business, to mind my own business, it was then he threatened to kill me, saying if I troubled him he would take a knife and kill me before his heart was cool and that the place he was to go, he would go at once. This alarmed me and I went and told the manager coffee was in the house.<sup>309</sup>

Though Mogge had been "living long time with Harry", she obviously felt no need to keep quiet about any business on the side he might have been doing with estate produce, a common enough activity for plantation workers, despite its serious treatment by the authorities. Harry had another version of the events, however, and another explanation for Mogge's apparently community spirited need to inform on her husband:

[T]he coffee does not belong to me, it is Hendrick's, my wife has made this trouble. She and myself had a quarrel. Hendrick took it from the mortar and he brought it to my house. I saw this, but whilst I was working aback cutting bush, Mogge told her ship mate, Aga the Driver, she then went and told the manager. [When Hendrick brought the coffee] I asked him what you got there, he said I bringing

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<sup>308</sup> CB2, 26 October 1824.

<sup>309</sup> CB2, 26 October 1824.

something, I said let me see and opened the pegaal, on finding it coffee I exclaimed; what are you going to do with this? He said I will come back directly. I waited for him till day came. It was night when he brought it. I forgot the next day. Next morning [I] went to work, when I returned at night my wife had put it at the door (meaning the coffee was taken away)<sup>310</sup> my wife put the trouble on my head on account of our quarrel. Hendrick has no house he does not live with me. He brought the coffee to my house, because he has no house.<sup>311</sup>

In Harry's version, he and his wife had had a quarrel, nothing unusual about that, and so when Hendrick happened to leave some stolen coffee at his house his wife thought to use this to cause Harry some trouble, as theft was not lightly treated by managers.<sup>312</sup> In this case the manager sought to prosecute via the judiciary rather than deal with it summarily, an occurrence reserved for the most serious of slave offences. Theft joined such offences as murder, rebellion, and Obeah, as amongst those which plantation managers most often considered to warrant outside help. Thus for Mogge to have brought this upon "her man" represented a very serious attack on Harry.

Harry's testimony continued:

She made bargain with her shipmate Aga, I don't know if they sent Hendrick with the coffee. I have belonging long time to my massa. He made me captain of the punt and I never been accused of theft. I do not know what bargain they have made. I expected Hendrick would have returned for it, and as he did not, I suspect it a trap laid against me. ... It was late every body asleep first cock crow. My wife and self were in the house. She was up a top<sup>313</sup> I down below in a back hammock. Hendrick knocked at the door, I got up and opened it. He put down the coffee and said he would return immediately.<sup>314</sup>

Mogge was called again to answer Harry's statement, but she remained firm that

Harry had alone brought the coffee to the house and that Hendrick was not involved.

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<sup>310</sup> Brackets from original Clerk's transcript.

<sup>311</sup> CB2, 26 October 1824.

<sup>312</sup> See Table 4.3, earlier in this chapter.

<sup>313</sup> Suggests that the house was either two storied or had a loft of some kind.

<sup>314</sup> CB2, 26 October 1824.

Her refusal to support him inflamed Harry and he thought now to introduce yet more information about their relationship:

She is telling d.... lies upon me because she has another man. His name is Wynend and it is only on this account she has brought this trouble upon me, it is a bargain they have made.<sup>315</sup>

According to Harry, then, his wife had been having an affair with a new man, Wynend, and to facilitate a separation from Harry she had consulted her kin, the “shipmate” Aga, who was also a driver on the estate, and together they had hatched a plot to bring Harry down. While ‘husbands’ came and went, ‘shipmates’ remained.<sup>316</sup> So, according to Harry, Mogge and her shipmate then organised Hendrick to deposit some stolen coffee in Harry’s house. Harry would be punished, possibly demoted in the plantation ranking, and could also lose his house to his wife who could then bring in her new lover. She would also avoid any repercussions for her infidelity from the manager.<sup>317</sup>

This would have been a perfectly plausible story if it were not for the fact that Hendrick, on the night in question, was “locked up in the sick house”, and Hendrick himself explained the improbability of his “getting out to pass the watchman, open the logie and steal so considerable a quantity of coffee, and take it to Harry’s house without being detected having a chain and block [on my] leg”, a punishment which had been ordered some time previously by the Fiscal.<sup>318</sup> Harry persisted with his version, however, and claimed that “a board of the sick house was loosened so that

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<sup>315</sup> CB2, 26 October 1824.

<sup>316</sup> CB2, 26 October 1824. See Chapter Five for discussion on ‘shipmates’ and other kin-like relationships which had formed in Berbice.

<sup>317</sup> Infidelity and marital disharmony, along with promiscuity were not that commonly punished, but were dealt with quite severely when they were punished. See Table 4.3.

<sup>318</sup> CB2, 26 October 1824.

any negro locked up in the same ... could get out".<sup>319</sup> But then another driver, Samuel, informed the Fiscal that he had slept in the sick house that night because he was unwell, and that he "frequently had an opportunity of knowing he [Hendrick] was there by the rattling of the chain at night".<sup>320</sup> Not surprisingly Harry's story was rejected by the Fiscal and he ordered a severe punishment, temporarily postponed as Harry "was at present labouring under Hydrocile".<sup>321</sup> Harry was eventually punished some weeks later, protesting his innocence to the end, and before the whole gang claimed that "all the negroes have joined in a story against me". The Fiscal was unmoved, and so Harry "received in presence of the gang 80 lashes and ordered to be worked in chains for 6 months".<sup>322</sup>

Harry had already been demoted from punt captain, and punished by the Fiscal; even worse, he had now been ostracized by his community. His 'wife' never denied the affair with Wynend, or going to her 'shipmate' Aga for help after her quarrel with Harry. The fact that Harry himself acknowledge his outsider status with the gang would have made it easier for Mogge to resort to managerial intervention to resolve a personal dispute with her husband. As an outsider, without strong kinship ties such as those Mogge had with the driver Aga, Harry was defenceless. The lengthy and rather pedantic investigation suggests that the Fiscal was keen to establish both Harry's guilt and Harry's low standing with the community, a condition which would simplify the exemplary punishment. Moreover the case suggests that such marriages were regulated and needed to adhere to customary

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<sup>319</sup> The ease with which slaves routinely escaped confinement is well noted in the documents, and will be dealt with more fully in Chapter Six.

<sup>320</sup> CB2, 26 October 1824.

<sup>321</sup> CB2, 26 October 1824.

<sup>322</sup> CB2, 26 October 1824.

practice. Even with the support of her community Mogge still sought the intervention of the manager to put her 'divorce' beyond doubt.

Even so, as the cases of Mogge above and Betsey in the preamble suggest, some women in Berbice society took 'new men' with a regularity that would have alarmed most Europeans of the day, but then they probably represented a distinct minority in the colony. As in any society, there were some men and women who needed little excuse to leave one spouse and take up with another. But while marriages were rarely sanctified by law, the documents consistently record that certain sexual behaviour was not tolerated at either the communal or official level. Once a commitment had been made, especially when children were involved, it was not easy to abandon the relationship without impunity. For example the wife of Leander on plantation Bloemhof, was not about to let her husband break up her family, and got the manager to intervene – the manager punishing Leander because he was “unwilling to provide the necessities for his wife and child and to live with them because he wants a divorce without agreement from his wife”. Despite being punished on successive days, Leander refused to comply and continued his relationship with the new woman, emphasising that managers could only do so much to influence the social behaviour of the slaves under their charge.<sup>323</sup> Control was not absolute or necessarily definitive.

Inevitably, when relationships broke down, one or more of the parties involved would be hurt, which sometimes drove the aggrieved party to desperate action. On 18 March 1822 the Fiscal was called to investigate the death of Richmond on

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<sup>323</sup> PB1, La Prudence 14 December 1826. Quote translated from Dutch. Even at this late date (23 years after the British had taken over the colony) several plantations still filled out their punishment record books in Dutch.

plantation Herstelling. Richmond had suspected his former wife Olivia of having been “connected with the negro England” and so attacked England while England was on watch duty. Richmond had “endeavoured to take [England’s] life by cutting his throat with a knife”. Richmond had been apprehended by the other workers and the drivers and brought to the manager who had him confined. When he was released he appeared “to be drunk” but soon collapsed and “in a very few moments he expired”.<sup>324</sup>

Open promiscuity was also considered unacceptable by estate communities. Consider Rosie on plantation Gebroeders, who was “young but of the most abandoned character, generally having 4 husbands at a time”, and, despite the manager’s best efforts, she would not “attach herself to one man”. This was a situation the driver of the estate, America, fully exploited, even if it meant having to abuse his resident wife when she objected.<sup>325</sup> What is interesting is not so much Rosie’s promiscuous behaviour, but the strong sense of outrage by America’s wife. Though behaviour like Rosie’s can be found throughout the documents, the reactions to that behaviour were consistently negative from both slaves and managers.<sup>326</sup> Men and women were regularly punished for impropriety, and some of the cases involved conduct difficult to reconcile with our ordinary understanding of slave behaviour. Take for example the case of Thomas on plantation Smithson’s Place, who was caught “taking possession of his master’s bed chamber for the accommodation of himself & a negro woman of bad character”, and then refusing to make “any apology

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<sup>324</sup> CB1, 18 March 1822.

<sup>325</sup> PB1, Gebroeders, 10 January 1827.

<sup>326</sup> Similar behaviour from Saantje, Juno, Carolina (PB1, Bloemhof 8 October 1826, Standvestigheid 22 December 1826, Belair 13 November 1826).



or promise to avoid such conduct in the future”.<sup>327</sup> The likes of Thomas and Rosie are common to all societies, but not common within them, and neither were they in Berbice.

If ordinary slaves could explore the range of permissible sexual conduct in Berbice society, so too could drivers, managers, and overseers. The driver April working for Mr Gallez, for example, was said to have been “father and grandfather to upwards of seventy negroes”, a number of progeny which could not reasonably be explained by a single wife. But that is not the same as promiscuity, and rather than earning approbation, the fact of his large family was given as proof of his standing within the community.<sup>328</sup> Drivers occupied a position of power and influence within the plantation, and this was often recognised by their community and no doubt affected their ‘desirability’ as sexual partners.

For managers and overseers the extent to which it was possible to sexually ‘exploit’ the slaves over which they had charge was mitigated by the fact that they were often expected to behave in a manner which would have been acceptable not just in Berbice society, but in far off British society as well. Samuel Hiles, an overseer on plantation Golden Grove figured in a complaint made by the slave woman Dido on the same plantation. Dido brought the complaint following a charge by a local magistrate, Mr. Downie, about ‘irregular’ relationships on the plantation. He alleged that the “negroes on the estate appear to be in a state of anarchy and disorder”, and that “one coloured family on the estate appear to have the whole control over the rest of the gang; and as one of the sisters of that family is kept by the

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<sup>327</sup> PB1, Smithson’s Place, 23 November 26.

<sup>328</sup> CB2, 21 September 1824.

manager, and the other by the overseer, no redress is given when any complaint is made against them". Taking advantage of the Protector of Slaves' presence on the estate, Dido also laid a complaint. Dido's testimony is very long (about 2,000 words), and centres around her status on the plantation and an arrangement she had with Samuel Hiles regarding himself and her daughter Emmy.<sup>329</sup>

Mr. Hiles had made an application to John's mother, to let him have her daughter Betsey as his wife; but she had already promised Mr. John Nicolson, who, after she had been three or four days with him, returned her. As Mr. Hiles was thus disappointed in getting Betsey, he asked me to let him have my child Emmy. I said it was not time yet. He said he did not want her as his wife, but would take care of her provisionally. He was always following me for Emmy, but I said I would not give her to him; but if he might be on the estate when Emmy should be a little older he might have her.<sup>330</sup>

Note that this horse trading of daughters to managerial personal was an entirely organised and consensual affair, and appears to reflect African and European traditions of 'arranged' marriages. As the case transpired it was probable that Emmy had already been 'connected' with Mr. Hiles. The coloured slave John testified that "the mother [Dido] was in the habit of bringing her [Emmy] in a blanket to Mr. Hiles". When the Fiscal asked Dido to respond to this accusation she replied, "I only brought Emmy once to Mr. Hiles, but not in a blanket".<sup>331</sup> Dido infers that Betsey, having been returned by John Nicolson after just four days, was no longer suitable to Mr. Hiles, who perhaps had wanted a virgin. The Protector of Slaves, not long in the colony, found the "licentious habits and propositions" of the overseer toward Emmy, and the "instrumentality of her parent" constituted a "reprehensible irregularity". Following the investigation the attorneys to the estate dismissed both Samuel Hiles

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<sup>329</sup> CB3, 13 June 1827.

<sup>330</sup> CB3, 13 June 1827.

<sup>331</sup> CB3, 13 June 1827.

and Thomas Ross, both for a breach of Berbice sexual etiquette as well as a breach of British social expectations of managerial behaviour in far off colonies. The authorities in this case, both the Protector and the plantation owners, were foreign to Berbice society.<sup>332</sup>

It is easy to dramatise the behaviour of white male managers towards the slaves over whom they had some measure of control. The image of the despotic plantation manager taking advantage of the defenceless female slaves in his power is often cited in the historiography, as well as in popular literature and film. Hilary Beckles, for example, contends that “new world slavery led to the legal and customary institutionalisation of the slaveowner’s right to unrestricted sexual access to slaves as an intrinsic and discrete product”.<sup>333</sup> The difficulty with such statements is that while clear evidence exists that such behaviour occasionally took place in Berbice, there is no evidence to suggest that non-consensual sexual access was widespread. Indeed, the evidence indicates such behaviour in Berbice provoked complaint from the victims, and opprobrium from the colonial authorities.

Sexual relations between plantation managers and slaves in Berbice were no less likely than would be expected in any society where power, prestige, and material advantage counted in attracting potential sexual partners. White men in Berbice greatly outnumbered white women.<sup>334</sup> Most white men who came to the colony were young and single. It is hardly surprising, then, that these men looked to the only realistically available females in the colony for female sexual companionship. For

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<sup>332</sup> CB3, 13 June 1827. The Protector of slaves had been only recently appointed and the plantation owner Mrs. A. Harris, lived in London.

<sup>333</sup> Hilary McD. Beckles, *Centering woman: gender discourses in Caribbean slave society*, Kingston 1999, p.22.

<sup>334</sup> In 1829 of the 570 whites in Berbice, 431 were men, or 76 percent, see Table 1.1, Chapter One.

slave women, it is no less surprising that many welcomed liaisons with an available group of men who could offer material and social advantages. From the records only 11 grievances were concerned with sexual matters, and only 3 of those involved a slave owner or manager trying to force attentions on a slave.<sup>335</sup> Thus, just one tenth of one percent (0.1 percent) of all slave grievances were for managerial sexual harassment, and this figure does not correspond to a widespread occurrence of this behaviour. Where sexual relations between managers and slaves were mentioned, as in Dido's case, they were overwhelmingly consensual.

Power relationships of any kind have been well recognised as facilitating sexual access to the weak by the powerful, and slavery was certainly no exception. What must be distinguished, if slavery is to be associated with the sexual conduct of Berbice's inhabitants, was what regularly occurring sexual practice existed which could not have existed without slavery. There is little to be gained by highlighting a few sensational cases, or individuals such as Thomas Thistlewood,<sup>336</sup> and pass them off, without evidence, as indicative of social custom. More significant than slavery in the expression of sexual custom in Berbice was the nature of the population mix, and the normal sexual behaviour of the colony's majority, the slaves themselves. There were just 431 white men and some 9,496 slave women residing in the colony, and more than 11,000 slave men.<sup>337</sup>

Some 0.1 percent of slaves complained of sexual irregularities by management, and 1.6 percent of slave offences were linked to marital infidelity and promiscuity,

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<sup>335</sup> The two cases of the 11 under the general sexual category were the complaints of Aquashiba and Felix, (CB1, 26 June 1919, and CB1, 23 August 1822).

<sup>336</sup> Thomas Thistlewood's extraordinary diary is a wonderful document but the man himself cannot be understood as an average planter in relation to sexual matters.

<sup>337</sup> See Table 1.1, Chapter One.

many of which were the result of complaints made by slaves to the manager about some irregularity they wanted the manager to fix. Given that slaves vastly outnumbered managers, these figures suggest either that managers were more likely (on a per capita basis) to be involved in sexual impropriety than slaves, or that impropriety by managers was more likely to provoke protest than such behaviour by slaves, or that impropriety by slaves was largely dealt with within the slave community and thus did not come to the attention of managers or officials. How managers responded to sexual and marital difficulties, as mentioned previously, depended largely on the personality and inclinations of the manager. For example, J. A. Van Meurs, manager on plantation Middelburg's Welvaren, found it necessary to flog one slave in the 8 month period of 1826 to 1827, and that was Enschildé who was punished for adultery.<sup>338</sup> More commonly, however, managers were concerned with promiscuous behaviour because of the trouble it caused among the local community. For example when trysts such as that between Damon, Santje and Fritz on plantation Prudence became violent or disturbing, then managers felt they had to intervene. Had the infidelities of Santje passed smoothly within the estate, it is unlikely we would have heard of the three slaves. But after Damon found "his wife Santje ... in the house of Fritz", and he had "hit Fritz and hit [Sanje] with the fist on the left breast, so that she lifeless [was] taken to [the manager's] house", then the manager was forced to take action.<sup>339</sup> Many managers only interfered in the sexual habits of slaves if they felt they had backing from the community or had been asked to intervene by an injured party. For example Robert Kennedy, manager of

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<sup>338</sup> PB1, Middelburg's Welvaren 14 May 1827.

<sup>339</sup> PB1, Bloemhof 8 October 1826. Translated from Dutch.

Herstelling, intervened in the affairs of the man Begin only after he had “treated his former wife so ill that he broke her ribs and at her repeated request I was obliged to separate them”. Unfortunately Begin simply found another partner whom “he has beat ... to that degree that the doctor has twice declared her case hopeless”.<sup>340</sup> Such behaviour would have represented trouble to managers on two fronts: the disturbance it caused within the community, and the loss of labour from a battered wife. It is perhaps a sign of Kennedy's reluctance to interfere in slave marital affairs that it took the 'repeated requests' of Begin's former wife to prompt him into action.

The woman Carolina presented the manager of plantation Rotterdam, J. N.

Lentz, with a compendium of problems over her attitude to sex and its consequences.

Nevertheless it was Carolina who brought a complaint to the Fiscal:

Says the manager Mr. Lentz locks her up every evening with her child on her coming from the field in a dark room without giving her any food for herself or child. Says she is locked up because she will not take a husband as the manager ordered but will take one of her own liking. Says that the person by whom she had a child (which is a mulatto child) does not mind her nor the child, she therefore does not wish lately to have another husband, that being tired of being confined at night, she has come to seek redress. Has no other complaint to make.<sup>341</sup>

Carolina in part was complaining of a lack of child support from the child's father, an unnamed white man. The manager Lentz did not address the problem of child support, however, but did address the situation of Caronlina's young child:

The mulatto child which she brought to town with her is about 4 years old, in its infancy she neglected this infant child to that degree that it nearly died, one of the women of the estate having lost her child then about the same age with this one, she offered to take it to which Mr. Prass then manager and attorney consented. This has been more than 3 years ago, from that time to this Carolina never troubled herself about the child but has constantly abused and ill treated the woman for

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<sup>340</sup> CB2, 14 April 1825.

<sup>341</sup> CB2, 27 April 1825.

her affectionate care of her infant which she stole away from the woman to bring to town. What her motive was is not known.

Today we might well recognize in Carolina's abuse of the woman who had taken over the care of her child the symptoms of desperation and loss. The fact that the child had been removed by the attorney Prass indicates the likelihood that Carolina did not have much say in the matter. Nevertheless it would be Carolina's father who would cast doubt on her version of the affair when Lentz offered testimony over her sexual proclivities:

She constantly creates disturbance on the estate by cohabiting with other women's men. She laid some time ago with a man who left her on account of her making herself a common prostitute. Her father complained to me and ... [I] told him as the man had left her I could do nothing, but if she took up with another and played more of her pranks, I would punish her. Lately she took up with a husband a few nights ago her own father brought her up to me. He complained that he had done all he could to recall her to a sense of duty but in vain. Her husband with whom she had lived only a very short time was about leaving her and a dreadful dispute had taken place between one of the men and his wife. Carolina being suspected by her father stated he [the father] had flogged her but his authority was not sufficient and therefore requested me to interfere.<sup>342</sup>

We do not hear directly from Carolina's father, but the Fiscal called the man and reported that he "corroborates this statement". Thus Carolina not only lacked the approval of her community, but even that of her own family. The remarkable aspect of the case is that it provides much information about the norms of sexual etiquette expected by inhabitants of the colony. Carolina, for her part, expected freedom to choose a husband of her own choice, expected also to get child support from the father of her child, and not least of all expected redress from the authorities over these demands. The evidence of the manager and Carolina's father indicates the range and scope of permissible sexual behaviour within their community. And the

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<sup>342</sup> CB2, 27 April 1825.

manager confirmed that his intervention was prompted by the community and the need to keep the plantation running as smoothly as possible.

Sexual malpractice, whether by slave or free, white or black, occurred in Berbice society, as it does in all societies. That white managers cohabited with black slaves is neither remarkable, nor the result of some peculiarity of slavery. Slave/manager unions were no more than a sub-category of a wider phenomenon: unions of powerful men with less powerful women. Sexual and marital practices by the slaves were largely self regulated and usually only incorporated the involvement of management at the behest of the slaves themselves. There is no evidence to suggest that managerial interference in slave marriage was common. Efforts to encourage more European attitudes to marriage began during slavery and persisted beyond it, but were more passionately pursued by missionaries than by managers, government officials or the majority of Berbice residents.

### **Blood bonds**

Grievances regarding blood relatives encompass several sub-categories. From Table 4.2 we find that parenting issues not related to work constituted a low 0.73 percent of grievances, while those relating to other family members accounted for 1.72 percent. Complaints over separation from family accounted for 1.09 percent. This last figure contrasts with Mary Turner's assertion in "The 11 O'clock Flog" that the "fear of



sale and separation were pervasive” among slaves in Berbice.<sup>343</sup> Childcare issues related to work amounted to 1.4 percent of grievances, and usually concerned the time available to care for infants while at work. Collectively, then, grievances relating to family members accounted for 4.93 percent of all grievances, and thus ranked with ‘vocational disputes’ and ‘economic interference’, and were not far below grievances over clothing allowances. There could be several interpretations of this low figure. One which has often been proposed is that children might not have been as highly valued as an adult relative. Children, especially young children, in a society with a high rate of infant mortality, might not have warranted an excessive emotional investment. Other blood relatives, on the other hand, were rare in a new colony dominated by immigrants. For pragmatic reasons these adult relatives not only provided strong emotional support but were also very useful allies in a difficult world where kin were important. Another, albeit less likely, explanation was that most slaves were entirely satisfied with the treatment of their children.

On the management side of the equation, the ill treatment of a family member was even less commonly mentioned, and from Table 4.3 we learn that these offences aroused the ire of managers on just 31 occasions in the eight month period – thus representing just 0.4 percent of offences punished, a figure well below that of marital offences. Such offences included abuse of one’s children, such as Hannah on

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<sup>343</sup> Turner, “The 11 o’clock flog”, p.48. Even the case Turner uses to illustrate this assertion suggests otherwise. When the slaves learned that the estate on which they worked was sold, they “took no notice of it”, as they fully expected that they would not be separated. This hardly suggests a pervasive fear. Turner also suggests that separation was imminent, but we learn that a simple misunderstanding had taken place and that the slaves were just to be occasionally hired out (CB1, 15 October 1821). Turner also claims that slaves feared being sold to Demerara. However, the figures for 1830 show that Demerara imported just 1 slave, while Berbice imported 5 (Higman, *Slave populations*, Table S1.20, p.430); and slave population figures for the period in question, 1819 to 1829, indicate that both colonies suffered the same 10 percent reduction in slave numbers, suggesting migration between the two was neutral (Ibid., Table 1.2, p.418).

plantation Canefield, punished for “insolence & gross inattention to her infant child”,<sup>344</sup> or the man Bishop on Bohemia punished for “having given rum to one of his children when labouring under severe sores in the hospital”.<sup>345</sup> But the records also mention instances of slave support for family members, though of course these would only arise when the support itself justified punishment, such as in the case of Norah on plantation New Forest, punished by the manager for “giving me a great deal of insolence & bad language for having put her daughter in solitary confinement”.<sup>346</sup> One of the more unusual records was of a punishment meted out to Harriet (“a young woman”) on plantation Gebroeders for “abusing an elderly woman belonging to the plantation & accusing her of incest with her own son”.<sup>347</sup>

Some ‘offences’ related to the treatment of parents by their children, as when Sophy on plantation Port Mourant was punished for “insolence to her father & threatening him with personal chastisement”<sup>348</sup>, or Flora on plantation Allness punished for “striking and abusing her mother”.<sup>349</sup> Interactions between siblings were also mentioned, as with Bella on Smithson’s Place, who was reprimanded for “severely beating a little girl her sister named Kitty”,<sup>350</sup> and Laurence on Bohemia who “severely beat his brother”.<sup>351</sup> One interesting case told of Derrick on plantation Foulis who was punished after

Running about the negro village with a drawn knife in search of his own brother Edward and threatening to stab him for no better reason

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<sup>344</sup> PB1, Canefield 20 November 1826.

<sup>345</sup> PB1, Bohemia 12 November 1826.

<sup>346</sup> PB1, New Forest 2 April 1827.

<sup>347</sup> PB1, Gebroeders 13 March 1827.

<sup>348</sup> PB1, Port Mourant 12 November 1826.

<sup>349</sup> PB1, Allness 5 May 1827.

<sup>350</sup> PB1, Smithson’s Place 23 November 1826.

<sup>351</sup> PB1, Bohemia 3 April 1827.

than that a duck his property was found dead near his brothers house presuming that his brother must have killed it.<sup>352</sup>

Most of the reports in the documents concerning sibling relations, however, were of a supportive nature, like Leanora on Sandvoort who was punished because she was “cursing & abusing the negro Domingo for ... relating the truth during an investigation concerning coffee stolen by her brother Jack”.<sup>353</sup>

By the time an incident reached the official records of the Fiscal or the Protector of Slaves, it had already, in some way, become abnormal. The fact that a certain behaviour required punishment by a manager, or that a particular action provoked a slave to make an official complaint, suggests that certain actions, either by slaves or managers, were considered unacceptable or abnormal by those concerned. Where such actions were consistently disapproved by various managers and slaves, we can assume that social norms had been breached. The fact that relatively few instances of complaint arose as the result of difficulties with parenting, suggests, at least in part, that most communities were able to handle such matters themselves and did not need to involve outside attention. The cases examined in this section highlight the issues which had become so important as to warrant an official complaint, or qualify as a punishable offence, at least in the mind of the plaintiff or the manager.

The most usual complaints against management concerning the treatment of offspring came from women with young infants, and involved their right to tend their very young children in their own way, or to nurse children who were particularly sickly for longer than was normal. These complaints involved the still unresolved

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<sup>352</sup> PB1, Foulis 9 November 1826.

<sup>353</sup> PB1, Sandvoort 21 December 1826.

difficulty that women everywhere have of raising young children whilst in full time work. Such was the case of Laura on plantation No. 6 whose manager, she claimed,

don't allow her to nurse her child in a proper way; that she has not the liberty to take her child to the field (which is very young), to give it now and then the breast, but is obliged to leave it with an old woman at home; that when she steals from her work to go to her child, and the manager or overseer discovers her, they flog her directly; that once the driver assisted her to go to her child, for which he was punished and locked in the stocks. Says to have brought this child with great pains in life; it being of a weak constitution, requires, of course, maternal attendance; and as she is not allowed to provide full for the same, she requests, therefore, assistance in obtaining this natural favour.<sup>354</sup>

Despite Laura's depiction of the manager as something of a brute, who would "flog her directly" for tending to her child in a way she thought important, the testimony of the manager indicates that he was not entirely unsympathetic to her plight:

[W]hen he was first manager of the estate, it was his intention to erect huts in the field for the women suckling their children; but this was objected to by Mr. Nieuwerkirk and Cameron, the proprietors, desiring the children to be placed with nurses; that there are four nurses to attend children; the women with young children are allowed until half-past six o'clock in the morning; they come in at half past ten, go out at half-past one, and return at half-past five; ... Denies the driver ever to have been punished as stated. Says, that his attention to children is proved from having raised twelve children on the estate in two years.<sup>355</sup>

So the manager had himself preferred that the women should have been able to take their infants to the field and nurse them in special huts provided there, but his own employers had objected to the arrangement and required him to provide the crèche instead. Nevertheless the manager also maintained that the women had only to be without their infants for no more than 4 hours of any day, and that childcare facilities were provided.<sup>356</sup> To many modern working mothers in advanced Western societies,

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<sup>354</sup> CB1, 4 June 1819.

<sup>355</sup> CB1, 4 June 1819.

<sup>356</sup> As on Ruimzigt where "all women having young children to go into the field one hour after the gang" (CB2, 3 July 1824).

the supply of childcare facilities and a three hour midday break might not seem like a great hardship. In any case, the complaint probably has more to tell us about Laura's reluctance to abandon traditional African methods of childcare, where mothers carried young children on their backs while they worked and fed them on demand, than it does about concern over the mistreatment of children under slavery. Laura found crèches unacceptable, but given the fact that few women complained then it must be assumed that few considered it an important enough issue to complain about, or that the childcare practices were acceptable in the majority of cases. Remember that women regularly complained about all kinds of what could be considered to be less important matters – such as not getting enough new clothing. It is reasonable to assume that the welfare of their infant children would have been more important than getting a new hat, so it is reasonable to suppose that if there had been a serious concern that slaves had for the welfare of their children they would have taken the appropriate action.

From the documents it is unclear what percentage of plantations employed crèches and what percentage allowed children to be taken to work, but both systems were used in the colony, and may well have been a work condition arranged between management and workers on particular plantations, such as appeared to be the case on No. 6 before the intervention of the owners. It is even possible that both systems occasionally appeared on the same plantation. Whatever system was employed there were bound to be objectors. For example Philip, on plantation De Resolutie, had a “dispute with the manager for preventing the woman Paulina his reputed wife from carrying her child Carolintje (about 20 months old) when employed carrying young

coffee trees".<sup>357</sup> By 1827 it was 19 years since the last African immigrants had entered the colony, so it is likely that Paulina had either been born in the colony, or that she had come to Berbice from Africa at a very young age, and was unlikely to have had much personal experience of African childrearing customs. Thus it seems that at this time Berbice had still not settled into any fixed and regular practice which would have made a complaint such as this unlikely. It is clear from the records that, at the official level, the matter was the concern of the proprietors or the manager, and that 'careful nurses' were considered officially appropriate for childrearing.

For most Berbice families the welfare of a single member of the family was not easily separated from the welfare of the entire family. Allowances which fell short for one member of a family would inevitably affect the other members. Along with food and clothing, adequate housing formed part of a triumvirate of responsibilities which slave owners owed their slaves in lieu of wages. On plantation Lochabar, Douglas felt that his temporary accommodation a quarter of a mile away from the main slave quarter was unacceptable:

Douglas states, That he is a man of family: he has a wife and four children: that he made the greatest part of the negro-houses upon the estate; and when the houses were all ready, the manager made a distribution of the houses among the estate's gang, and every one got a place except him and his family. He went to the manager to ask for his house: the manager told him there was no house for him. I repeatedly asked for a house, but in vain. Some time ago I went to Mr. Cameron to complain, but without effect. Douglas lives with his family at the water side, and it is some distance from the buildings.<sup>358</sup>

The manager was quick to reassure the Fiscal that Douglas would not have to live in his temporary accommodation much longer, and that his new house would be finished soon. Of equal concern were the allowances of food, as families naturally

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<sup>357</sup> PB1, De Resolutie 27 March 1827.

<sup>358</sup> CB1, 28 April 1823.

pooled their individual allowances, and so a shortfall of one member affected the whole family. Such was the complaint of Prudence from plantation Golden Grove against the manager John Ursher on 18 February 1825.<sup>359</sup> The complaint was ostensibly brought on behalf of Prudence's youngest child, and specifically about the food allowance given to the child. Food allowance grievances were far more common than grievances involving children, and represented 10.5 percent of all grievances. The food allowance given the child was not related to work, as the child was below working age. An allowance given to an individual would ultimately affect the rest of the family, and so the complaint involved the whole family. Prudence had a husband and four working children, and she felt strongly that her family's contribution of labour to the estate deserved better treatment.

Prudence began her testimony by emphasising her contribution to the estate's demography by being "mother to ten children", even if "of them five were dead". To put those five children into perspective, this period in Berbice featured birth rates which rarely exceeded 1 child for every 10 women.<sup>360</sup> She also emphasised to the Fiscal that during all the time she had belonged to the plantation she had "never found the way to town to complain" but that she was "now under the necessity" to do so, a measure of her concern.<sup>361</sup>

The children who cannot work receive no allowance, the creole nurse boils plantains for them and the allowance is two plantains a day, this is not food sufficient and as long as I or the child's father will supply it out of our scanty allowance it was done, but this failing I spoke to the creole nurse but she said she could only give the children the allowance she received.<sup>362</sup>

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<sup>359</sup> CB2, 18 February 1825.

<sup>360</sup> Higman, *Slave population*, pp.682-684.

<sup>361</sup> CB2, 18 February 1825

<sup>362</sup> CB2, 18 February 1825

Prudence then explained the action taken by her husband, and its consequences:

My husband seeing the child grow thin and at night he stole a bunch of plantains, the watchman caught him and next morning told Mr. Ursher the manager who ordered my husband to be locked up for four weeks at night.<sup>363</sup>

Watchmen were not anything like 'head men' on estates, and their duties were not taken as a sign of authority,<sup>364</sup> so it is worth noting that the watchman on this occasion was prepared to do his job conscientiously, especially as, from Prudence's testimony, he was sympathetic to the family's cause:

He [Prudence's husband] told manager his inducement for stealing and the manager said very well, the watchman then said massa if you give the creoles each their allowance you would put a stop to this. Manager said very well.<sup>365</sup>

Despite this entreaty, and the apparent acknowledgement by the manager, the situation did not improve, as Prudence explained:

Next Sunday allowance was served out - a small bunch of plantains not bigger then my finger was brought, cut into four, and one forth given me for my child's allowance, this is not near enough, and as I think a child is entitled to allowance and that what I receive is not sufficient I come to look for redress.<sup>366</sup>

Prudence was a feisty and forthright woman, and already had a reputation on the estate for obstinacy, the manager describing her as "dissatisfied character". She would later be punished 8 times for unsatisfactory work, 4 times for refusing to work and once for lateness.<sup>367</sup> So it was perhaps no surprise to the manager that before

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<sup>363</sup> CB2, 18 February 1825

<sup>364</sup> Many workers disliked the job, as did Bellington on plantation Lancaster who pleaded "Master, before I watch I had rather you put me in the field" (CB1, 15 October 1821).

<sup>365</sup> CB2, 18 February 1825

<sup>366</sup> CB2, 18 February 1825

<sup>367</sup> PB1, Golden Fleece 1826: 10 November and 26 November, PB1, Golden Fleece 1827: 11 January, 28 January, 3 February, 6 February, 14 April, 24 April, 24 April, 3 May, 4 May, 15 May, 1 June, 13 June.



going to the Fiscal for redress, Prudence had refused to work until her child was given an acceptable allowance of food:

I took the plantains given for my child to the manager's door, showed them to him and left them there, as I did not get a fit allowance for my child and as I had left the plantains at the door, I refused to go to the field. Manager made two of the drivers hold me and I was flogged with a cow skin. I then was let loose and I come to complain.<sup>368</sup>

The manager began his reply by outlining the allowances provided the children through the hands of the 'creole minder', and how this situation had proven unacceptable to most of the mothers on the estate and "this woman [Prudence] and her husband in particular". The manager, acknowledging the wishes of the majority rearranged the distribution of the allowance and gave the allowance directly to the mothers. The manager's testimony differed from that of Prudence only as to the size of the allowance. The manager testified the allowance was "at the rate of half a bunch", and Prudence a quarter of a bunch. The manager acknowledged, however, that "the plantains from the dry weather were rather small".<sup>369</sup> The manager went on to then provide his version of Prudence's protest action and the events which led up to her coming to complain:

This woman refused going to work. I ordered her in the stocks where she remained till next morning. She again refused going to work and I ordered her to receive a strapping with a strap over her shoulders. This woman is a very discontented and dissatisfied character, continually complaining of sickness. Seldom performs a days work, and yet she walked a distance of nearly 30 miles in a day with her child [to town to complain].<sup>370</sup>

It seems unlikely the allowances greatly affected the nutrition of Prudence's family. Recall how the mother left the allowance at the manager's door, so the

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<sup>368</sup> CB2, 18 February 1825.

<sup>369</sup> CB2, 18 February 1825.

<sup>370</sup> CB2, 18 February 1825.

family was not starving. It was a matter of principle and she had in mind the long term benefit which the extra allowances could provide. There was also the child itself, who was presented to the Fiscal and whose physical condition “proves it does not want food”. The manager also made a point of informing the Fiscal that there were “extensive provision grounds” the slaves maintained, the produce of which “they do not sell on account of their distance from the market”. This distance from the market would not have precluded the trade which slaves regularly undertook with nearby plantations or with bush negroes. Nor would it have precluded using the produce of the provision grounds to feed animals which could subsequently be sold and for which the distance from market would have had a limited impact. Despite the abundance of food grown on the slaves’ provision grounds, it was emphasised by the manager that this was “not had in view” when allocating the formal allowances provided by the estate. Hence the manager believed that the complaint, rather than being one about allowances, was actually about the “slight punishment” that he “found himself obliged” to inflict on Prudence after she had refused to go to work. The manager, however, should have recognised the most important feature of the case: that both Prudence and her husband were willing to resort to extreme and persistent action to further the prospects of their family. The strength of the arguments and the official recognition of family welfare was echoed to a degree in the Fiscal’s judgment which found evidence that the manager had been mean with the allowances and recommended that the allowances should be increased if they were scant, which the manager “willing engaged to do”. The manager then added that had “any application ... been made to him on the estate to that effect he would have increased the allowance”, a somewhat surprising statement given that by his

own testimony he had not responded to Prudence's complaints and had indeed locked her up for making them.<sup>371</sup>

If scant rations for a young child could motivate parents to complain, then it is little wonder the circumstances which confronted Edward on plantation Reumzigt prompted him to bring an action before the Fiscal on 3 July 1824. Edward's complaint on behalf of his child, Dirk, and his wife, Colinette, provides a tragic and complicated example of the difficulties of family life in a tropical workhouse:

My child has the yaws, my wife went to ask the manager to let her mind it, he refused but gave it to the old nurse who attended the children, manager sent my wife to work in the field, the child has no care, it was sent to the cow house under the charge of the old woman who boils plantains for the hogs and horses, she is so much occupied that she cannot attend to the child, it is therefore so much neglected that the flies continually following the eruptions of the yaws, all the sores has worms in them, if the child is at this moment dead or not I cannot say. The old woman told my wife she had no time to mind the child, when we come from the field which is very late we show it all the attention we can, the old woman says she does not know what is the matter with it, but it cries all night, this makes me come to complain, the old woman told my wife you must make fire near the child, she did so, the child's leg got burnt, my wife went and told the manager. He ordered her to be confined both feet in the stocks her legs as much extended as they could be, only one plantain and water was allowed her a day. She is now in the stocks, we get no redress if we complain to our attorney.<sup>372</sup>

Edward was understandably distressed about what was happening to his family – his child was gravely ill, and his wife had been locked up in the stocks. It seems incredible that Colinette should have been punished just for telling the manager that her child had been badly injured. The manager was a free coloured man, Mr. F. H. DeQuay, and the punishment returns for the plantation he later managed (Karel &

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<sup>371</sup> CB2, 18 February 1825.

<sup>372</sup> CB2, 3 July 1824.

Willem's Hoop) show a high rate of punishments.<sup>373</sup> Nevertheless DeQuay's defence of the complaint provides some insights into the case:

Her child Dirk had the yaws, it was given to an old woman named Elizabeth ... Colinette took the child from the old woman to her home, it is customary for all women having young children to go into the field one hour after the gang, this woman did the same although her child is 17 months old. Last Wednesday week the child got severely burnt at night whilst under the mother's care, the left leg, its private parts and one of its hands. Colinette brought the child in the morning to the old woman covered up in cloth and giving it to her said 'here mama take the child I am going to the field I have a bad row' ... about nine o'clock the old woman first discovered how the child was burnt .... Immediately on its being discovered the hospital nurse told it to the overseer, ... the old woman and the hospital man brought the child to me, the old woman said 'see massa how Colinette has killed her child'<sup>374</sup>

The manager's explanation fails to address the fact that the child had been burnt accidentally, and that this resulted from advice given by the old woman Elizabeth. He does, however, explain why he had punished Colinette: she had failed to tell Elizabeth about the burned leg. The manager interpreted Colinette's omission as proof that she was trying to "throw blame on the old woman" for the injury to the child. As it turned out, the child was not "killed" when first brought to Elizabeth but was very ill, and died some "three or four days" later after some intensive treatment of "sweet oil mined with white lead", and other treatments prescribed by the doctor. The manager claimed to have been greatly concerned over the welfare of the child, and testified that

as the doctor was so unwell as not to be able to come over, and fearful the child might suffer from want of proper applications, I went over myself, described the state it was in, received his instructions, ... he

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<sup>373</sup> Plantation Ruimzigt would disappear from the records by the time the punishment records began. The 68 slaves on Karel & Willem's Hoop, however, were to receive a total of exactly 68 punishments in the eight month period November 1826 to June 1827, (PB1, Karel and Willem's Hoop).

<sup>374</sup> CB2, 3 July 1824.

knows how anxious I was about the child after discovering how severely it was burnt.<sup>375</sup>

As was relatively common with complaints made after 1823, an effort was made by the Fiscal to get testimonies from 'independent' witnesses, and this involved calling up other slaves to corroborate any of the testimonies. In some cases the plaintiffs were asked if they could provide some witnesses to support their case. In this case the driver Willem was called to testify:

[T]he child of Edward and Colinette had yaws, the child was given in charge of the girl Fanny under the superintendence of an old woman name Elizabeth to attend to it when anything was required, before it had yaws it was kept with the other children in the logie, but on getting yaws manager said it must be separated from the others. Fanny therefore kept the child during the day at the care house where the old woman Elizabeth cooks plantains for the mules and hogs. Elizabeth has the leprosy, she therefore is not a proper person to mind children at least I would not wish her to have mine, not from want of attention, but from the disease.<sup>376</sup>

Already we are given a great deal more information, not just about the case at hand, but about the general arrangements and conditions on the plantation. Willem's testimony exonerates neither the manager nor Colinette. He questioned the practice of leaving children in the care of someone he considered to be diseased.

At sunset Fanny took the child always to Colinette's house, the cow house is old, exposed to the wind, therefore rather cold, the child however was there only during the day, Elizabeth lives in the same house with Fanny's father and mother. One evening after Colinette had eaten supper she went to sleep having the child next to her close to a fire made on purpose to warm the child; fire is useful in curing the yaws, there was a board between her and the fire, but I suppose the child endeavouring to suck at night got in [with] its mother who was fast asleep and so fell in the fire, it burnt its leg, three of the toes also, Colinette must have slept so sound that she did not hear the child cry.<sup>377</sup>

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<sup>375</sup> CB2, 3 July 1824.

<sup>376</sup> CB2, 3 July 1824.

<sup>377</sup> CB2, 3 July 1824.

Willem's testimony provides a lot of general information surrounding the case: he tells us that Elizabeth had leprosy, and that she lived with Fanny's father and mother. He also informs us of his belief that fire cured yaws, a common condition among many peoples in the tropics and one which plagued the inhabitants of Berbice. His testimony supports Edward's in that he believed the couple were endeavouring to treat the child as best they could. Willem continued:

In the morning Colinette took the child to Elizabeth, I do not know that she told Elizabeth the child was burnt, the old woman discovered it and told it to me saying Willem see how this child is burnt, the mother brought it to me this morning and did not tell me it was burnt, I said as soon as manager comes home I will tell him, I did so, he inquired of Elizabeth and she said in my presence that the mother had not told her, but she found it out herself the manager did all he could to save the child, the doctor being ill.<sup>378</sup>

Willem was careful to say that he did not know whether Colinette had informed Elizabeth that the child was burnt, but that he only knew that Elizabeth claimed that she had not been told. It was a case of Elizabeth's word against Colinette's. The reason that Colinette had been punished – and it was this punishment that had prompted Edward to bring the complaint in the first place – was that the manager thought Colinette had failed in her duty as parent specifically by having neglected to alert anyone to the severe injury the child had suffered, and so endangered the child's life. Edward had testified that Colinette “went and told the manager” after the child's leg got burnt. This contradicts the evidence from Willem and Elizabeth, though it is possible that Elizabeth had been told, but failed to pass on the information. Willem continued his testimony:

The manager ordered Colinette to be locked up both feet in the stocks and accused her of murdering the child, I told the manager the child

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<sup>378</sup> CB2, 3 July 1824.

would not recover, he released the mother to attend it, it died that day. In the afternoon manager went to the field told Edward to throw the coffee, go home and see his child [that] Colinette had burnt, Edward came and remained all night, next morning went off the estate before the child died.<sup>379</sup>

The state of the child obviously affected Edward badly, for he left the estate after learning his son might not live. Parental concern is evident not just from the grieving father Edward, but in an entirely incidental way from Willem, who remarked that “at least I would not wish her to have [my children]” cared for by Elizabeth. The manager too can be seen to have been affected by the child’s injury and suffering, and seriously endeavoured to do all he could to help Kirk. The overall picture we have is one of genuine sorrow over the incident by all the actors involved, indicating the social expectations of parental behaviour. Edward’s complaint seems more like a cry of agony over his loss than any grievance he felt warranted redress, and certainly not what the Fiscal later described as a “mess of malicious falsehood against the manager”. Unhappily, in a time when emotional trauma over the loss of loved one was little understood, Edward was flogged for bringing a false complaint.<sup>380</sup>

Edward’s complaint was one of two heard simultaneously by the Fiscal against the manger Mr. F. H. DeQuay on that day. The other complaint, by the woman Diana of the same plantation, although precisely about excessive punishment, also concerned the health and welfare of a close relative in need of attention, Diana’s mother.

I did not get the quantity [of coffee] required and the manager had me locked up, I have an old blind mother who has no one to take care of her but myself, on coming home from the field my mother said she

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<sup>379</sup> CB2, 3 July 1824.

<sup>380</sup> CB2, 3 July 1824.

was hungry. I began to boil plantains, Driver came to take me to the stocks, I told him I was dressing supper for my mother as soon as it was done I would come, the manager however ordered me to be locked up immediately, I was confined before the holidays and remained more than a month in the stocks, so that my knees are quite swollen.<sup>381</sup>

The anger and frustration of Diana is understandable. That she did not get the “required” quantity of coffee was not in dispute. That she should get punished for this was also not in dispute. But that her old blind mother should suffer as a consequence she considered unreasonable, and this rendered the incident worthy of vigorous protest.

The manager began his testimony by denying that Diana was her mother’s only caregiver, claiming that “a girl is allowed the old woman till half past seven o’clock every morning to attend upon her”. But it was her mother’s supper which was lost because of Diana’s punishment, not her breakfast. Nevertheless after DeQuay found that Diana and “five others had not picked what they ought to have done”, he “told the women driver to lock them up for the night, four of them went quietly to the stocks”. But Diana wanted to tend her blind mother first. Consequently DeQuay had to send the overseer to get Diana, and then, according to DeQuay, the real drama began:

I had to send the overseer for Diana at the hour usual to lock up when she came to the tamarind trees near my house she took her calabash with victuals threw it away and called out “brothers and sisters come I will make good wig for this massa”, and made use of many very abusive expressions in the Creole language, I went with her to where the stocks are, I directed both her feet to be confined, she refused to comply, one therefore only was confined.<sup>382</sup>

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<sup>381</sup> CB2, 3 July 1824.

<sup>382</sup> CB2, 3 July 1824.



Diana flaunted her defiance in front of the whole gang – her “brothers and sisters” in her community. In her anger she took the opportunity to abuse and curse the manager, accusing him of stealing the estate’s provisions. DeQuay warned Diana to keep quiet:

I said Diana you had better hold you tongue, her answer was “C... for you, you all hear what I say”, I confined this female fourteen days in the stocks as a punishment for abusive and impertinent language and more particularly on account of her stubbornness.<sup>383</sup>

To confine a slave so long in the stocks represented a serious loss of labour for the plantation. DeQuay was an employed manager, and so was responsible to his employer for the productivity on the estate. Such punishment must have been considered indispensable to maintain his authority for DeQuay to sacrifice so much labour. But Diana was in strike mode, and refused to buckle under, further frustrating DeQuay:

I went repeatedly to the stocks expecting she would humble herself and beg pardon, during her confinement she had as much boiled barley as she could eat, this she threw away in the room saying it was only good for hogs... After she had been five days in the stocks I went there. She said to me your head is stubborn mine is stubborn so you better shoot me.<sup>384</sup>

Diana’s frustration was at that point where even life and death had become unimportant in relation to her struggle. Of her mother, or what was happening to her all this time, we do not learn, and are left to presume that someone else on the estate had attended her needs. Diana, after some time (according to her, one month, and according to the manager, 14 days) appeared to have calmed down, at least that was what she told DeQuay:

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<sup>383</sup> CB2, 3 July 1824.

<sup>384</sup> CB2, 3 July 1824.

Diana having at length begged pardon (at the end of 14 days) I immediately released her, called her up and offered her a pass, if she thought she had been undeservedly punished, she refused it, went to work for four days and decided then no doubt Edward persuaded her to join him.<sup>385</sup>

The manager had offered Diana a pass to go to town if she thought she had been unfairly treated, which she declined. Some days later, however, when Edward from the same plantation came to complain, she accepted the manager's offer. After hearing all the testimony, the Fiscal called up Diana again, and asked her if she disputed the manager's statement: she said she did not dispute it, even though her testimony differed from that of the manager's in regard to the time she had spent in the stocks. Everywhere else, however, their testimonies do not substantially differ, except by omission. Although the Fiscal "approved of the punishment" the manager had given Diana, he "recommended for the future to restrict the confinement in the stocks to the night", and that if someone needed to be confined during the day that, "he report the same to the proprietor or attorney of the estate". Such comments indicate that the Fiscal thought that the manager had exceeded his authority in this case, even if he agreed that Diana's defiance warranted a harsh penalty.<sup>386</sup>

Not all complaints of ill treatment of a family member were directed against managers. The case of a female slave worker<sup>387</sup> on plantation Albion on 8 February 1825, not only illustrates the strength of sibling relations, but introduces a problem which plagues child welfare agencies to this day: the decision by 'authorities' to take over the welfare of a child from a parent. It might be assumed that under slavery, the

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<sup>385</sup> CB2, 3 July 1824.

<sup>386</sup> CB2, 3 July 1824. It is interesting to note that female plaintiffs never complained of flogging after 1823, even though the slave amelioration laws in Berbice did not come into effect until 1 November 1826.

<sup>387</sup> Unfortunately the record of this case omits to mention the name of the slave bringing the complaint.

authority of the master was pre-eminent, and took precedence over the authority of a parent regarding the circumstances of slave children. We have already seen how managers often regulated the rearing of very young children. This was not a situation, however, that was restricted to slavery. In many societies, including modern Western societies, either regulation or unavoidable circumstance have forced parents to rear their children in ways they might not otherwise have chosen.

Nowhere was this more apparent than in the treatment of child illness. In practice, however, managers were reticent to intervene except in extreme cases, much like today. Though managers (like modern child welfare agencies) had a 'theoretical' right to remove children from parents, it would not have been any more 'politically' acceptable to exercise that right in 1820s Berbice than it would be for the State to arbitrarily exercise similar legal rights today. Uninvited interference in matters regarded as solely the realm of the immediate family prompted strong opposition from slaves.

The case on plantation Albion began with the testimony of the female slave who, though in the later stages of pregnancy, felt strongly enough about the treatment of her sister, and the associated treatment of her sister's sick child, not just to intervene on the plantation, but to make her way to town to complain to the Fiscal:

The driver thought proper to lay my sister down and flog her with the whip. The manager not only knew it, but saw the flogging. I was picking cotton, I left the field and went to the spot and asked the driver why he flogged my sister, he told me to go away and took his whip and flogged me also. I have the mark now across my thigh, which I show you. The manager got upon his horse and rode away. The driver is too great a man, the manager is afraid of him. The fault against my sister was because she flogged a child.<sup>388</sup>

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<sup>388</sup> CB2, 8 February 1825.

Though the plaintiff laid the fault primarily with the driver, the ‘great man’ on the estate, she also made certain to implicate the manager, at fault as much for his weakness and his inability to control the actions of the driver as for any participation in the events of the flogging. Interestingly, the woman claimed that the reason the driver had punished her sister was because her sister had “flogged a child”, an offence the manager never mentioned.<sup>389</sup>

The Fiscal took time out at this point to record the fact that during her testimony the woman had been in a very emotional state:

The complainant is far advanced in pregnancy and during this statement worked herself up to a very high degree of choler.<sup>390</sup>

The manager, John Strogham, then gave his testimony, and so provided some background to the plaintiff’s sister, and the circumstances which may have led to her altercation with the driver:

The sister of complainant took a child who had the hooping-cough to the field. The sick nurse informed me of it, I told her go and bring the child in the hospital. The sick nurse returned and said the woman refused to give the child up and said it should not come. I ordered the driver to make the woman bring the child to me. She refused. Just about this time I went to the field and found he had given the woman a few stripes for refusing to send the child home. I got off my horse to go where the driver was. I saw complainant come up to the driver and was very abusive. He threw his whip round her thigh once and I immediately ran up knowing the woman was pregnant and fearful that she might induce the driver by her passionate conduct to repeat the stripe. I said to him, ‘let her alone’. I got on my horse and rode away. I found afterwards she had left the estate. I have managed that property eleven years and this is the first instance of one of the negroes leaving the property to complain and although this complain is not against me, I feel much regret at its occurrence. The complainant is a fine young woman but very much addicted to passion.<sup>391</sup>

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<sup>389</sup> CB2, 8 February 1825.

<sup>390</sup> CB2, 8 February 1825.

<sup>391</sup> CB2, 8 February 1825.

The manager made no mention of the sister having flogged her child, indeed he claimed that the woman had simply refused treatment for the child. Either way the complaint stemmed from a dispute over the plaintiff's sister's child and her care. Assuming the version given by the manager, the driver, and the sick nurse, to be true, then the child had whooping-cough – a disease with a characteristic sound which made it an easy childhood disease to diagnose accurately, even in 1825. It is contagious, and was often fatal.

The two sisters had been in dispute with management over the welfare of the child prior to the incident in the field. We must give the mother the benefit of the doubt and believe that she had the best interests of the child in mind when she took it to the field, if only because, had she been reckless in her care, her sister would not have offered such passionate support. Refusing medical assistance for children was occasionally mentioned, and may have indicated a genuine mistrust of the medical attention offered by the estate, or by a particular sick nurse or doctor. It is also possible that the pair believed that other, perhaps African, medical treatments were more appropriate. Suspicion and apprehension by slaves over medical treatments offered by plantations sometimes led to a refusal of treatment. For example Berentje on plantation Vryberg was punished for “refusing to bring her infant son George to the hospital to have medicine administered to him”.<sup>392</sup> Generally, slaves refusing medical assistance accounted for 0.59 percent of punished offences.<sup>393</sup>

The actions of the nurse and the manager on plantation Albion, however, indicated that they too had the best interests of the child at heart. Like the complaint

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<sup>392</sup> PB1, Vryberg 16 December 1826.

<sup>393</sup> See Table 4.2 above.

involving Kirk, all the actors in this action had similar outcomes in mind for the child: for it to get better. Only in their approach and their perceived 'rights' or 'duties' over the child's care were they in real dispute. Supposing that the child did have whooping-cough, there are several possible explanations for the action of the mother. Perhaps she was persisting with some tradition brought with her from Africa, perhaps she did not trust the hospital or the nurse, or perhaps the disease was unknown to her and she did not consider it serious. As for the actions of the plaintiff: her conspicuous anger, and her accusation against the driver, indicates a long-standing grievance with this particular man. Perhaps for her the altercation with her sister had been the last straw in a long running feud. Like most people, whether free or slave, tyrants were never well tolerated, and if the tyrant was a slave, the slaves of Berbice were as willing to resort to the authority of the enslavers to redress the balance as anyone else. The fate of the plaintiff in this case was left to the manager, the Fiscal ordering a spell of confinement but under the manager's discretion.

## Close

Michael Craton has observed that "we evaluate slavery not by the manner in which it controlled and shaped slaves' destinies, but by the degree to which it allowed slaves to make family lives of their own".<sup>394</sup> In Berbice the slave system could be seen to be, at best, indifferent to slave family life. Nevertheless, the records indicate that

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<sup>394</sup> Michael Craton, *Empire, enslavement and freedom in the Caribbean*, New Jersey 1992, p.259.

family life persisted in Berbice despite that indifference, and reflected patterns of family development which Craton and Barry Higman have noted elsewhere in the British Caribbean. They have also noted how the historiography has overlooked the accomplishments of slaves in family formation. Craton points out that many writers on the Caribbean have “exaggerated the matrifocality and instability of modern Caribbean families as 'deviant' results of an alleged absence of family life in slavery”, and that his own and Higman's findings have “proved these assertions to be wrong”.<sup>395</sup> The exaggeration of the dysfunctionality of slave family life in the Caribbean is but one more example of how slavery has been made to seem much worse than it was. By placing slavery in such an extreme position it has inadvertently represented slaves as weak and incapable of controlling their own lives or of developing their own society. As seen above there were a few examples in Berbice of managers who occasionally frustrated the efforts of slaves to have children, but this was motivated by fears over the loss of valuable labour rather than an attempt to circumscribe familial bonds. Furthermore, as the manager's testimony in such cases attests, managers did not admit such behaviour at the official level. This indicates that neither slaves nor officials tolerated conditions which would have prevented slaves from forming stable family structures.

As the cases in this chapter illustrate, Berbice was partly populated by eccentric individuals, who make a disproportionate claim on our historical attention. When reviewing these cases it is important not to assume that the actions of these individuals necessarily represented the behaviour of the slaves we hear little about. The real significance of such cases lies in the social responses to the uncharacteristic

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<sup>395</sup> Ibid, pp.233-235.

behaviour of aberrant individuals. It would be wrong to make assumptions on slave family formation by looking at the behaviour of the few promiscuous females or the odd licentious male. Better to look at the reactions to their behaviour by their community, by managers and by the officials of the colony. These reactions demonstrate that slave families were largely cohesive and though not formalised in the European Christian tradition, were nonetheless defined and supported by customary rules and practices.

Later, in a section on slave suicide in Chapter Four, we will meet Christiaan and his prosecution by the Fiscal for murder. While the dramatic circumstances of Christiaan's complicity in his wife's suicide and the murder of her daughter claim much of our attention we should be no less interested in some of the peripheral information contained in the case. Underscoring the tragic events was the separation of the family by their sale to different owners. On the surface it would seem to be a classic case of despair caused by the evils of slavery. With close reading, however, the case illustrates precisely the opposite: that officials and owners were extremely reluctant to separate families and went to great pains to avoid it. Prior to the sale efforts had been made by the parties concerned to keep the family together, and when these failed Christiaan came to the Fiscal

That in consequence therefrom [the Fiscal] communicated with Mr. Luthers on the subject who stated that he had purchased ... the Woman Jannetje and her said two children. That it had been provided that the Negress Jannetje should be exempt from all field work or other hard Work and employed solely in the House to the fulfilment of which agreement L. C. Abbensets had deducted a Sum of two hundred pounds [from] the appraised value of said Woman. That the negroe Christiaan had applied to him Mr. Luthers to purchase him but on his application to Mr. Knecht for such purpose it appeared that Christiaan had two young wives who each had a brother belonging to said Mr. Knecht – and who he Christiaan was desirous should accompany him. This increase of Christiaan's family induced Mr. Luthers to decline further purchase but promised Christiaan at the Fiscal's Office that on



his Mr. Luther's return from the River ... he would speak with Mr. Knecht further on the subject.<sup>396</sup>

The sale of Jannetje and her children included consultation with all parties involved and was conditional even to the extent of what work Jannetje could be expected to do for her new owner. Luthers had been perfectly willing to buy Christiaan too, but then balked at the prospect when he found that Christiaan wanted his other wives and their respective brothers to be bought also. Notwithstanding his reasonable denial Luthers was still willing to negotiate and even to consider selling Jannetje and her children to Mr. Knecht to keep the family together.

The case highlights the difference between the letter of the law regarding a slave owner's rights to buy and sell slaves at will, and the customary practices of the colony which demanded intense consultation with the parties concerned to arrive at a satisfactory outcome. The case also highlights the strength of these non-Christian family structures which included more than one wife and the attachment of brothers. There is no evidence anywhere in the records which indicates that family separation was regarded as acceptable practice by either the slaves or the officials of the colony, nor is there any evidence that separation was anything but a rarity. Certainly it was no more common than that which could have been expected in Britain in this period through the circumstances of dismissal or disability which saw many families separated by the workhouse and the contingencies of the poor laws.

This chapter has examined the very close relations within marriage and family. But these were not the only relationships to shape the character of Berbice society. The next chapter will focus on the broader manifestations of kinship structures through which cultural forms found their greatest freedom of expression.

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<sup>396</sup> CJ2, pp.417-418.

## Chapter 5: Social Life of Berbice 2

### Introduction

Last Tuesday evening I went to the stable, whilst there I saw some one go to the houses where negroes who behaved improperly are put in solitary confinement.

I asked, 'who is that?'

The answer was, 'Me.'

'Who me?'

'Smart.'

'What do you want there?'

'To tell my sister good night.'

'Smart, you have no sister there.'

'I call her sister.'

'But you know since that house was put up, there is an order that no negro is permitted to have any intercourse with those confined in it, therefore you must be off immediately.'

To this Smart replied, 'It is very hard, I may not tell my mattee good night.'

I said, 'Smart it is not only by my order, but it was during your master's life time the same and is so on every estate.'<sup>397</sup>

Such was the conversation the manager McWatt had with the slave Smart on plantation Allness in early April 1825. The conversation more or less encapsulates the dynamic interface between two cultural traditions of kinship and community. Smart called the woman "sister" because the two had established a quasi-kinship bond. Such bonds were common in Africa, and may well have travelled with the

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<sup>397</sup> CB2, 6 April 1825. Note that the layout and punctuation have been added to the text to clarify the conversation.

slaves to Berbice.<sup>398</sup> Certainly these quasi-kinship structures were common in Berbice. Indeed, such bonds were essential to slave communities to fill the void left by the splintering of more formal kinship structures by the process of enslavement. The manager, however, only really understood, or chose to understand, such bonds in terms of European sibling relations. As he knew that the woman was not Smart's 'real' sister, he felt justified to view Smart's attempt to see her as suspicious. When Smart next referred to the woman, he called her "mattee", perhaps in recognition of the difficulty he thought Europeans had with quasi-kinship structures, or possibly because such relationships were still too fluid to have been formalised to the degree that a particular word corresponded to a particular kinship construction. It is probable that McWatt, as an experienced manager, who had worked and lived intimately with many Africans, had some knowledge of African cultural practices. It is therefore likely that his refusal to accept Smart's terminology represented an active resistance to an intrusion into his own cultural traditions. The spread and complexity of African styled extended kinship and communal bonds would continue to challenge European notions of such relationships, in much the same way as we saw that African marital conventions challenged European conceptions of marriage in the previous chapter. That does not mean, however, that all Europeans were ignorant of the customs or oblivious to the importance of such relationships – especially when it

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<sup>398</sup> Being common in Africa does not mean that all regions, tribes or societies in Africa had the same kinship structures or necessarily followed a particular pattern, though many similarities existed. Figures recorded for Berbice in 1819 show the distribution of African birthplaces for those slaves in Berbice born in Africa. These indicate a relatively even spread over 6 regions of Africa. Slaves from Bight of Benin and Central Africa both recording over 22% while slaves from Bight of Biafra, Gold Coast and Senagambia all recorded over 10% (Higman, *Slave populations*, Table 5.10, p.127). As noted later in this chapter many of these areas correspond to regions which commonly used fictive kin constructions.

suited them. For example, Hercules on plantation Karel and Willem's Hoop brought a complaint against the manager F. DeQuay, claiming that

his brother's child is put to mind the manager's child, it cried on account of which the child was locked up in the stocks in the sick house and only one plantain allowed her with a glass of water. She was confined for three days.<sup>399</sup>

Though DeQuay had been newly appointed as manager, he was a coloured creole, and so would have been expected to have tolerated Berbice slaves' quasi-kinship structures. But it was the attorney, Mr. Bowensteder, not the manager, who replied to the accusations, and it was Bowensteder who called upon the established quasi-kinship relations common to the colony to defend the charge by asserting that the girl in confinement could not possibly have been inadequately fed because of her quasi-kin and communal connections:

He [Bowensteder] further adds that he cannot believe that the girl could have been sentenced to be fed with one plantain, as all her friends could have access to her.<sup>400</sup>

Regardless of what the manager may have ordered, it would be unthinkable that a slave with communal bonds could go hungry, even whilst in confinement.

While many Europeans were able to maintain kinship ties with their family in the old world via correspondence and occasional visits, this was not often the case for African immigrants. It has been suggested slaves did retain some contact with Africa during the period, and the example of Sanya,<sup>401</sup> mentioned in the previous chapter, suggests that connections with Africa had not altogether ceased merely because the slave trade had been abolished. Though this isolated example cannot be

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<sup>399</sup> CB2, 21 December 1824.

<sup>400</sup> CB2, 21 December 1824.

<sup>401</sup> Sanya was an African indentured servant relatively new to the colony (CB2, 29 July 1825).

taken for a widespread phenomenon, it is worth remembering that after emancipation British Guiana as whole attracted some 14,060 voluntary African indentured servants.<sup>402</sup> For most of the inhabitants of the colony before emancipation, however, it is probable that few relationships would have survived the journey to Berbice. The establishment of new fictive or quasi kinship relations might not have been as difficult as has been imagined, as in many African societies kinship did not rely solely on genetic or marital bonds. Studies of ethnic transformation in the region of Africa where most of the African-born slaves in Berbice came from, indicate that fictive kin relations were well established and customary processes allowed for these fictive kin relations to change over time into specific kin relations. Enid Schildkrout, in her study of ethnic identity in Ghana, has suggested just such a mechanism:

Generalized kin, that is, those who cannot trace precise genealogical links, may behave as if they were close kin[.]...[A]fter several generations, the descendants of generalized kin may claim to be specific kin, since they can trace genealogical links, even if in the first instance these were based on fictions.<sup>403</sup>

Further she claims that:

Among first-generation immigrants particularly, the generalized use of kinship terms and the subsequent adoption of jural kinship obligations is so wide-spread that it becomes difficult to distinguish biological from fictive kin.<sup>404</sup>

Nevertheless, unlike marriage and sex, or the birth of children, the development of broader kinship structures required greater co-operation among the slaves, and the process of kinship development would have evolved over time. The sheer

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<sup>402</sup> Figures for the period 1834 to 1867 from G. W. Roberts and M. A. Johnson, "Factors involved in the working force of British Guiana in the nineteenth century", *Social and Economic Studies*, v23(1) 1974.

<sup>403</sup> Enid Schildkrout, *People of the Zongo: The transformation of ethnic identities in Ghana*, Cambridge 1978, p.139.

<sup>404</sup> *Ibid*, p.139.

complexity of such ties took time to construct and they could not be formed with same ease that getting a spouse or having a child could be accomplished. Thus, during the initial stages of immigration, slaves with many different origins had set about the process of constructing extended kin and communal relations. Such ties may have diminished somewhat as more formalised structures emerged – when Aunts and Uncles, Nieces and Nephews and Cousins, and the various ‘in-laws’ could eventually occupy the space once exclusively filled by shipmates and countrymen.

It has now been widely recognised that African immigrants to the West Indies quickly developed alternative and successful kinship structures. For example Karen Fog Olwig has described “ties which would generate a basis of social and cultural distinction and hence a source of identity within slave society”.<sup>405</sup> The two readily identifiable structures mentioned in the Fiscal’s documents of Berbice were ‘shipmates’ and ‘countrymen’. The special and rather unique relationship implied by the term ‘shipmate’ was undoubtedly derived from the shared experience of the Atlantic crossing. Barry Higman and Michael Craton understand fictive kin relations such as ‘shipmates’ as indicative of first generation slave societies eager to establish kinship networks, but in so doing characterise these bonds as temporary. However, considering that most slaves came to Berbice before 1807, it is reasonable to assume that, by the 1820s, the voyage would have been at least a dozen or more years in the past. That shipmates had not only survived and persisted, but had become woven into the normal social structure of Berbice society during the period of study is testament enough to their strength and importance. Such ties are well recognised by

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<sup>405</sup> Karen Fog Olwig, “African Cultural Principles in Caribbean Slave Societies”, in Stephan Palmié (ed.), *Slave Cultures and Cultures of Slavery*, Knoxville 1995, p.31.

historians. Jean Besson has observed that among the Jamaican 'free village' and maroon societies, "this shipmate bond ... included the creation of fictive kinship ties"<sup>406</sup>. Besson placed some special significance on the prohibition of incest in such relationships, which she saw as an indication of their strength and formality. Though this may also have been the case in Berbice, it is not a feature mentioned in the documents. What was mentioned, if only as an adjunct to various evidential testimonies, was the closeness and importance of the bonds to the structure of local communities.

To what extent these quasi-kinship structures in Berbice reflected structures in Africa goes beyond the scope of this thesis, but as it will become apparent in this chapter, such structures, during the period of study, were extremely important and commonplace within the colony. Communal, personal, and kin relations were often fundamental to the identity of those inhabitants cut off from their indigenous lands and thus forced to rely substantially on local individuals for support and social interaction. The relationships discussed below are not meant to define all relationships forged between the slaves in Berbice. Nor are they intended to restrict these relations to definite and cohesive categories. There are many overlaps, and many irregularities, as some of these cases illustrate. The idea is to present the general trend of relations and to understand how they manifested themselves in a period that, for most, represented their first generation in the colony.

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<sup>406</sup> Besson, "The Creolization of African-American Slave Kinship in Jamaican Free Village and Maroon Communities", p.187.

## Friends and mattees

Documents which mention friendship structures do so usually in an incidental way. Disputes over friendships were not common, but the character of such relationships was often revealed circumstantially within other disputes. This kind of ‘unintentional’ testimonial evidence can be more reliable and representative than testimony directly relating to a particular dispute. This incidental evidence draws upon socially agreed conventions and is voiced within a common language of social understanding. Friendships as such have not received a lot of attention from historians. Sidney Mintz, Philip Morgan and Jean Besson all note the importance of non-related kin, but hardly mention the role of friendship in the structure of African-American cultures.<sup>407</sup> Slavery affected fictive kin relationships and friendships, just as the circumstances of any society affect such relationships, but no evidence has been found that such relationships were significantly undermined by the practices of slavery in Berbice. That slaves were “shipmates”, “countrymen” or “mattees” were recorded without remark from the clerks and the officials, and managers or slave owners did not appear to interfere in such relationships. And with good reason – slaves resented all forms of unsolicited social interference from managers or owners. For example, Christmas on plantation New Forest became “extremely insolent” when the manager tried to “settle a dispute between him and another negro”.<sup>408</sup>

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<sup>407</sup> Philip D. Morgan, *Slave counterpoint*; Sidney Mintz, “Slave life on Caribbean sugar plantations: some unanswered questions”, in Stephan Palmié, (ed.), *Slave cultures and the cultures of slavery*, Knoxville 1995; Jean Besson, “The creolization of African-American slave kinship in Jamaican free village and maroon communities”, in Stephan Palmié, (ed.), *Slave cultures and the cultures of slavery*, Knoxville 1995.

<sup>408</sup> PB1, New Forest 11 February 1827.



The term 'mattee' appears often in the Fiscal's documents. Though it very often corresponded to the term 'workmate' in modern usage, it was also used in the broader context of friendship, and may even have been substituted, as in the case of Smart above, for closer fictive kin relationships. The following cases highlight the spread. In these contexts either term 'workmate' or the term 'friend' could be easily substituted:

I heard the mules walking about and went to look after them, one of my mattees told me the manager was calling me, I went and said do you call me?<sup>409</sup>

I much prefer working with my mattees in the field.<sup>410</sup>

Both the above quotes imply loosely associated relations very much like acquaintances or friends would be today. In the next quote, however, the relationship could easily be more formal, as the 'mattees' belong to another plantation, so they were obviously not the person's workmates:

I went to walk last Sunday to see my mattees at La Prudence, next morning as I was going home the overseer of Vigilantie met me on the road.<sup>411</sup>

At other times the word friend is used instead, and in this case was distinguished from any other closer relationship:

He the manager loiters away the time till twelve o'clock, if any one should by accident be absent, neither your wife, brother or friends is allowed to take our allowance as on every other estate in Berbice, it is put back in the store & you go without for the week.<sup>412</sup>

Such friendship structures in Berbice would have varied enormously as they do today. In some cases the bond was strong enough to include some formalised

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<sup>409</sup> CB2, 24 July 1825.

<sup>410</sup> CB2, 7 January 1825.

<sup>411</sup> CB2, 4 November 1825.

<sup>412</sup> CB2, 29 August 1825.

dependency, while others only signified the accidental association of co-workers in a workplace. The bonds between friends and mattees were often strong only under certain conditions, and they did not always provide the reliable means of support that would have been provided by true fictive-kin relations. Nevertheless, friends, mattees, and workmates would have helped to pass the hours of toil in the field more pleasantly, and afforded the opportunity to work cooperatively to get tasks completed. Moreover, such relations help tie various kin groupings into a single community.

At times a mattee might have lent a hand to those who were not able to work as well – though drivers and overseers were regularly in the field to ensure that all workers performed to their supposed capacity. But workmates could also be enemies, and mattees could be rivals. For example, Willem on plantation New Forest brought a complaint to the Fiscal about a manager over the manager's preference for one of Willem's work mattees:

I come tell you a little story. We are two watchmen in the plantain walk we have half of the walk, if [the manager] finds plantains stolen out of my mattees walk he flogs me for it, the reason is he has the other watchman's daughter, if I beat the other watchman for allowing plantains to be stolen, his daughter sets manager up to flog me, the Saturday I came the manager went to Cato's walk, that's the other watchman's name, he found some plantains on the dam stolen by the negroes. He asked me about it, I said massa I have my walk, he has his, if fault is found on his walk he is accountable, if any out of mine I am accountable, and I cannot catch the thief I must satisfy to be flogged, but I cannot bear to be flogged for another's fault, manager said 'you must bear it', finding this too much I come to know if I am to continue bearing the punishment another deserves. We are living up the Bush and if I continue to submit I will be killed.<sup>413</sup>

Willem described Cato as a 'mattee' but he meant anything but a friend. The relationship was that exactly of a workmate for whom one develops an intense

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<sup>413</sup> CB2, 1 April 1824.

dislike. This matter was clearly Willem's enemy – part of community situation that he feared could eventually kill him. With the manager in a sexual relationship with Cato's daughter, the bonds created by such a relationship were obviously advantageous to Cato's life on the plantation at the expense of Willem. The manager recognised the pre-eminence of family, and by taking care of his quasi in-laws, he had, in a way, become a 'member' of this particular family, even if he might have shrunk in horror at the suggestion back in Britain.

In his reply, the manager, William Seaman, made no mention of any relationship with Cato's daughter and only addressed the matter of the stolen plantains, which, he alleged, were being sold by Willem around the neighbourhood:

In reply to Willem's complaint I have to state that having dined with Mr. Miller of Best Coffeeland estate, in consequence of a message from him saying he had something to say to me. He informed me that he understood Willem had sold or given away plantains on the Friday before to a free black woman named Sarah Kraan and a free man named Thomas, on my return in the evening I told Willem to come to me early in the morning with the other watchman as I wanted to see him particularly. He must have got notice of the information thus received and he absented himself that night, taking away the only craft belonging to the estate, thus prevented me from attending before to reply to the complaints. I got passage now on a boat belonging to one of my neighbours.<sup>414</sup>

The manager did not deny a relationship with Cato's daughter, and so it could be assumed that such a relationship existed. We can only speculate on whether Willem was involved in the trade with the local free coloured people Sarah and Thomas. It is worth noting that while Willem and Cato were having a hard time getting along, that did not seem to be the case with the two managers. How deeply imbedded the managers were in the culture and society of the communities is evinced by their

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<sup>414</sup> CB2, 1 April 1824.

intelligence of the local gossip, and knowledge of much of the local happenings around the estates they worked and lived on with the slaves.

Most friendships, however, conformed to customary expectations. One distinguishing characteristic of friendships was that they were usually conditional. Unlike kinship relations, friends were only friends so long as each agreed to the bond. Once the bond was broken the duty of loyalty would vanish. In some ways friendships required closer attention than kin relations, their very fragility demanding circumspection. Often friends had to make that extra effort to get along, unlike kin relations which were more permanent and secure and thereby more tolerant of certain behaviour. On the other hand that very strength could spell disaster if real acrimony developed within a kinship group – kin relations could not be teased out from the broader family group. To abandon or disagree badly with a member of the group was to risk isolation. This was not the case with a friendship. Take the complaint made on 26 April 1827 by a slave owner who detected a man milking one of his cows. The milk, as the complaint unfolded, was the least interesting aspect of the story. More interesting is the disintegration of a formerly close friendship. The complainant was J. L. Nixon, unhappy in Berbice,<sup>415</sup> who reported a burglary on his property to the Fiscal. Furthermore he claimed that the thief was “harboured all last night, in the bed of Samuel Christmas, my slave” and that he had warned Samuel the day before not to allow “strange negroes” in his yard. By his own estimation, Nixon should not have been surprised by Samuel’s actions:

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<sup>415</sup> Mr. Nixon would leave the colony, and claimed to “abominate slavery” (CB3 25 May 1827).

I observed [to Samuel] at the same time, that he [Samuel] was so horrid a character himself, that there was no keeping any thing between him and his associates that came in their way.<sup>416</sup>

Samuel Christmas, rather disingenuously, admitted “that he had found a man in his bed, whom he afterwards found to be Robert” but that he had then “ordered him out, but he refused to go”. Klaas the cook supported Samuel in that “he is confident that it was Robert who milked the cow”, adding that Robert had blamed Samuel “only to clear himself”. Another of Nixon’s slaves, Nelson, was called to provide evidence, but was less helpful to Samuel’s cause:

I have a wife from plantation Vryheid, who came to sleep with me last night; this morning at gun fire I told her to go home. When she went out she called me, and said some one was milking master’s cow. I got up and saw Robert run away, having left a calabash behind him, where the milk was. Samuel Christmas and Robert are particular friends.<sup>417</sup>

By stating the two men to be “particular friends” he invested the relationship with a quality that went beyond that of mere acquaintance. He also cast doubt on Samuel’s proffered outrage at Robert having taken his bed. Note the use of the term “a wife”, rather than ‘my wife’, implying that he may well have had more than one. Note too that Johanna (Nelson’s wife) felt it appropriate to report the thief’s activities to her man, probably with the expectation that he would pass on the information to his employer. That her husband, and probably she herself, considered it their social responsibility to report such activity indicates perhaps that non-related individuals could not expect protection merely on the grounds of the shared status of ‘slave’.

Not surprisingly Robert came to his own defence, and fleshed out his relationship, his “particular” friendship, with Samuel:

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<sup>416</sup> CB3, 26 April 1827.

<sup>417</sup> CB3, 26 April 1827.

The night before last, I met Samuel on the road, who asked me why I did not call to see him. I said I was working at the fort, but as soon as I would be at leisure I would call and see him. Last night I went to pay him a visit, he offered me boiled plantains to eat. Afterwards he was going to fetch home Colonel Nixon, and asked me if I would ride up with him; I said, no; he then said that while I was acquainted in the place I was welcome to his bed. So I remained to sleep. In the morning I saw Sam get up with a calabash and a bottle. I did not milk the cow.<sup>418</sup>

The wording of the testimony creates the impression that these two good friends had become somewhat estranged, and that Robert's excuse of working in the Fort was just a way of perhaps opening up once more what had been a much stronger relationship. The people in this case were acting in different ways, not as a collective of slaves, but as individuals each with his or her own loyalties and attachments. Despite Robert and Samuel being 'particular friends', a relationship supported by their own evidence as well as that of Nelson and Nixon, their behaviour towards each other in this matter reflected the image of 'bad characters' that Nixon had proposed at the outset – an image reinforced both by Johanna's willingness to report the men and by Robert's guilty behaviour when Johanna saw him that morning. The interpretation by the Fiscal of this 'particular' friendship informs us of the strength conventionally attributed to such bonds in Berbice society. In the Fiscal's eyes, Samuel was guilty of the theft along with Robert, for friendship was taken as sufficient evidence that each must have known what the other was doing. Consequently, the Fiscal ordered both to be flogged 35 lashes by the 'public executioner'.

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<sup>418</sup> CB3, 26 April 1827.

## Communal bonds

From Table 4.2 in the previous chapter, it can be seen that the most common socially related grievance was that of general treatment and dissatisfaction, with 187 grievances, or nearly 10 percent of all grievances. Table 4.1 shows that the Fiscal considered this rather nebulous grievance was also the least deserving of slave complaints. The poor outcome prospects for slaves bringing this complaint, however, obviously did not deter them from pursuing it. The reason may partly lie in the fact that when slaves were so generally miserable they had little to lose by bringing their grievance to the Fiscal. This unspecific complaint could involve any number of issues, and sometimes the exact cause of the slave's dissatisfaction is hard to determine, but quite commonly the complainant was an individual at odds not just with the managers or the masters, but with the entire community. For example Willem<sup>419</sup> on plantation Maria and Agnes, under the management of J. A. Dehnert, made this short but telling statement regarding his grievance:

I complain of nothing only this; I cannot agree with my Master, in a former complaint made to Mr. Scott acting Fiscal I was punished, I am constantly called a bad negro by my master, I therefore wish to be sold or hired out, I can't agree either with my master or the Negroes, I would rather work in chains than in my masters place, I was formerly called a favourite but now I am considered a worthless good for nothing, this is the cause I wish to be sold<sup>420</sup>

The master was generally the slave's owner, but as the owners in Willem's case were a family who lived in Holland we can assume that he was referring to the manager.

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<sup>419</sup> Willem was a common slave name, so that this is not the same person as other Willems met previously on various plantations, though he crops up a little later in this chapter. Slave names have been usually associated with a particular plantation, and this is usually the key to identification. Where there was more than one slave on a particular plantation with the same name some other identifier was usually employed to differentiate as has been previously discussed.

<sup>420</sup> CB2, 1 February 1824.

At the time Willem brought the complaint, however, the manager was very ill, so that when Willem includes “the Negroes” among those with whom he “can’t agree”, it may well indicate that the manager was merely a figurehead for his dissatisfaction, and that Willem just did not get on at Maria and Agnes. Willem makes no mention of any specific problems, but does say that he had previously been in a good position on the plantation. The manager, after he had recovered, provided some insights into Willem’s distress. He was apparently responsible for the deaths of three of his workmates in an accident. This had troubled Willem and had put him at odds with his community.<sup>421</sup> Whatever Willem’s position with his fellow slaves at Maria and Agnes, it was not strong enough to endure disaster. With no friends and no strong kinship group support Willem was lost. Consequently, he would “rather work in chains” on another plantation than remain at Maria and Agnes.

Generally, communal bonds were essential to provide slaves with sufficient support to exist happily in their immediate social milieu. For example Blossom, whom the Fiscal described as a “young robust healthy woman”, might only have had half a husband, but she had developed broad community support during the 11 years she had lived on plantation Kilcoy. Previously she had lived on plantation Yeovil which had failed and was sold, a situation commonly feared by communities of slaves because this could, as in the case of Blossom, involve re-establishing community relations. Blossom explained that when she had first come to Kilcoy, she “did not know the law of [the] estate”, that is, she did not know the estate’s customs. She had taken a husband, but he left her when she got sick. When she got better another man took a fancy to her, but she was not interested: “I had one of you men

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<sup>421</sup> CB2, 1 February 1824.



already” she said, “and he left me”. However, the man had “kept on following and, seeing he had great heart” for her, she finally consented. The man, Tom, already had a wife but one who suffered from a mental illness. Nevertheless, the two women lived with Tom for some years, but the tripartite relationship often broke down and bitter quarrels ensued. There was much carrying of “blanket, pot and plantains” from one house to another. This hubbub disturbed the manager, Duncan Fraser. It was not the only problem the manager had with Blossom, because Blossom was a “great skulker” and was “constantly hiding away for two or three days”. More recently she had got into the habit of taking her cotton bag with which she “pretends she is going ... with the other negroes, but then no one can find where she goes”.<sup>422</sup>

Luckily for Blossom, though things were not going too well in her marriage, she did have a good network of community friends. Though Fraser often locked her up, “on application of her friends [he] has always released her”. A few days of good behaviour pass, but then “the freak comes upon her and she is off”. When Blossom came to town to complain about the short time she was confined (before her friends had got her out), the journey of “only 12 miles” took 10 days to complete.<sup>423</sup> The Fiscal in this case found against Blossom and “with a view of braking her of her old habit of running away” he “ordered her to be confined every night in the stocks for one month, providing her plentifully with food”.

Managers had to be forever mindful of the sentiments of the community. G. P. Turnbull, the manager of Lochabar, for example, claimed to have been verbally and

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<sup>422</sup> CB2, 20 September 1824.

<sup>423</sup> CB2, 20 September 1824.

physically threatened by one of the slaves on the estate called Chapon. Even so he had to be careful:

I would have flogged him the next day, but it would have given much dissatisfaction to the whole gang to flog on a holiday.

Turnbull was in fact recognising that managers were not free to behave as they wished towards the slaves under their authority. Naturally, there were exceptions, and not all managers shared Turnbull's or Fraser's deference. The manager on plantation Cruysburg, Zacharias Van Leuman, was unmoved by an application from the friends of Lidia who told the Fiscal:

Some short time ago I was saving plantains, this was told the manager name Van Leuman. He accused me of stealing them, he ordered me to be confined in the stocks where I was held for a considerable time. Some of my friends at my request begged for me, but manager would not comply.<sup>424</sup>

Though Van Leuman in this instance refused to 'comply' to the wishes of Lidia's friends, it would not always have been the case. Without such friends to champion your cause to the manager, early release would have had little chance of success. The importance to an individual of being an integral part of a community was that it provided support in a host of different situations within the workplace. Quite often the workplace itself could define a community, with the inherent dynamics of insider/outsider participation from the various individuals on an estate. Slaves not only worked on a plantation, but they lived there as well, and though there were several different work areas, there was commonly just a single area devoted to slave quarters. This close association between work and home meant that the workplace milieu might easily have been defined by the strength of communal bonds

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<sup>424</sup> CB2, 8 June 1824.

established within the slave quarters. In such cases, slaves who were lazy and let the team down might have been ostracised by the local community.

With such strong friendships forming within plantations, there was the potential of inter-community rivalry. Such rivalry underlined the commitment to community bonds. While open disputes between communities of slaves may have been rare, they highlight one of the drawbacks of cohesive communities – their very cohesiveness became the source of division between groups of slaves and frustrated any concerted efforts by slaves as a whole to ameliorate the conditions of their enslavement. On the other hand, such rivalries also ensured a certain degree of uniformity of treatment towards slaves on different plantations. Each community was acutely aware of any advantages a neighbouring community had on their estate, and were sure to demand equal treatment if only not to lose face. This was evident in some of the disputes discussed in Chapter Two.

Occasionally, the rivalries between communities deteriorated into open hostility. The situation between the slaves on plantation Overysseel and the slaves on plantation Vrouw Johanna was one such example. The communal feud which ensued required the manager of Overysseel to call in the local Civil Magistrate to investigate. The details of how the trouble began are sketchy, but it seems to have begun during the holidays, and there was some talk of wife stealing. Philander on Vrouw Johanna was punished on 18 April 1827 for “having been at plantation Overysseel ... and made quarrel & the day after been over again & renew the same quarrel with Overysseel people”.<sup>425</sup> On the following day a major altercation broke out, as was reported by

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<sup>425</sup> PB1, Vrouw Johanna 18 April 1827.

the manager of Overysseel, and which had necessitated him to call in the local authorities:

In consequence of a fight taking place between the gang of Overysseel & some negroes of Vrouw Johanna the Civil Magistrate of the 4<sup>th</sup> district, after an investigation held on Overysseel it was proved that the gang of Overysseel had committed themselves by going on the Vrouw Johanna's estate & fighting the negroes of that property.<sup>426</sup>

Neighbouring plantations in Berbice were never very far apart, being typically long but very narrow. The evidence from the documents shows that there was a great deal of interaction between plantations, so the important feature of the above dispute is that it happened, good indication that the slaves had formed bonds oriented to a particular plantation and which were also capable of transcending regional community bonds.

Slave communities fiercely resisted interruption and interference. An example of this occurred when a large group of slaves from plantation De Resolutie, together with their children, made a deputation to the Fiscal. They came not to complain of what they described as their new owner's "unpleasant humour", but that they thought their gang was to be broken up and sent to other plantations. Nassau, speaking for the slaves, said, "it was a hardship, as they had been so long together, that they should now be separated". When told that they were not to be permanently separated but only to be hired out, they still objected and "behaved extremely unruly, declaring they would not be hired out". What the slaves objected to, and what the Fiscal refused to acknowledge, was that even to be hired out would interfere with their

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<sup>426</sup> PB1, Overysseel 19 April 1827.

community. Such hire exposed them to an alien community within which they would have no standing, and would be, even if collectively, outsiders.<sup>427</sup>

Movement and change disrupted established friendship and kinship structures. Benjamin, for example, was quite willing to cooperate with the system until he was told he might have to leave his familiar surroundings. Benjamin “was accustomed to this colony” and thus “refused to go to Nickerie” and requested therefore to be sold.<sup>428</sup> Benjamin was an individual caught up in a process of change, but when an entire plantation was sold or abandoned, then it had the potential to affect a great many people. Slaves and plantations were owned separately, so that when a plantation was sold it affected the slaves of both vendor and purchaser. Neither gang in such cases would have been happy with the arrangement.

The slaves belonging to William Forsythe were concerned about having to move to Bucktown.<sup>429</sup> They protested to the Fiscal and demanded to be sold. One of the men making the complaint was Bob who argued:

I work for my massa the other day Master said he was going to Bucktown, I was to go also. I said no massa put me up to Vendue, I cannot go there, I wish be put up at Vendue, I cannot go with you all about. He said nothing only tomorrow the boat will come every body must take shovel and hoe to go, I said no I will go to town.<sup>430</sup>

Thomas had a similar story:

I am told I am to go to Bucktown, I don't want to go. I belonged to Mr. Hoson, he did me good, but I don't want to go to Bucktown, I want to go on Vendue table. I am Mr Forsyth's first negro. We are to

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<sup>427</sup> CB1, 15 October 1821.

<sup>428</sup> CB1, 17 July 1820.

<sup>429</sup> Bucktown may have got its name from a reference to an Indian settlement, as Indians were known by the slaves as ‘bucks’.

<sup>430</sup> CB2, 4 March 1824.

make a place at Bucktown, he and Mr. Ross has made a bargain to make a sugar Estate there.<sup>431</sup>

In effect Thomas is saying that he belonged to Forsyth only under certain circumstances, one of which was that he would remain within his established community. When Forsyth threatened to take Thomas out of his community, Thomas considered his ownership by Forsyth unacceptable and wished to be sold. His co-operation with slavery was thus conditional. The depth of feeling by the slaves in this case and the one on De Resolutie can be determined from the fact that the Fiscal was driven in both instances to remark on the excited nature of the plaintiffs:

The complainants conducted themselves in a disrespectful manner towards the Fiscal in making the above statements expressing themselves in so passionate a manner he was under the necessity of calling them to order.<sup>432</sup>

Such excited behaviour highlights the emotional wrench which the separation from friends and familiar surroundings could generate. There is no evidence of a great amount of movement of slaves between plantations, but in cases where it happened, it commonly caused problems. The new plantation Thomas and Bob spoke of in their testimony was also causing problems for the slaves who already lived on the estate, a plantation called Friends. The slaves were unhappy to learn of the sale of their home to Forsythe and Ross. In a separate action, eighteen female slaves on plantation Friends petitioned the Fiscal to have the sale annulled. They were told it had to be sold because it was no longer profitable. The slaves reasonably argued, however, that if it was not profitable for the old owners then how could it be profitable for the new ones?

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<sup>431</sup> CB2, 4 March 1824.

<sup>432</sup> CB2, 4 March 1824.

[T]he attorney of the estate had thought proper to dispose of that property to Mr. Forsyth, giving as reason that the land on the estate was not good, this however is mere pretence, a considerable quantity cultivation of canes being established, that a very large crop of sugar was made and shipped to their masters in England, the estate was a good one, as any in Berbice, as a proof of which they stated Mr. Forsyth who had managed the estate for many years had or was about to purchase the land and buildings, he must be a good judge if the land was good or not, and if good for him it must be for their proprietors, that they would be removed to Corantine where they did not wish to go, and requested they may be prevented from going.<sup>433</sup>

Thus, the sale pleased no one, except presumably the buyers and sellers of the property. The Fiscal's response to these complaints was driven largely by the dictates of commercial efficacy. His refusal to consider the inevitable upheaval to established slave communities that such commercial negotiations entailed was perhaps predictable within a colony established largely for the benefit of capital investment. One of the more compelling reasons a slave might have eschewed escape would be the disruption such action would cause to established community relationships. But this point had little influence on the Fiscal, if he was even aware of the fact. Instead, the Fiscal explained to the slaves that the profitable operation of their workplaces was the primary concern, and that this occasionally necessitated the reorganization of the workforce. In the first case he explained to Bob and Thomas

the necessity they were under of going to work where directed, that the Estate about to be formed was not at Bucktown as they termed it, but on a healthy part of the Coast next to a Sugar Estate belonging to Mr. Ross.<sup>434</sup>

For the plaintiffs on Friends the Fiscal had even more to say, but ultimately communicated a similar message:

The Fiscal endeavoured to explain to these women that it appeared to the attorney of the estate Mr. Ross that the returns of the Friends was

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<sup>433</sup> CB2, 18 August 1824.

<sup>434</sup> CB2, 4 March 1824.

not proportionable to the considerable outlay and expense the proprietors had been put to, ... the proprietors were therefore desirous of employing the labour of their slaves in cultivating a more grateful soil. That the complainants had proof of the kindness of their owner who sent them out abundance of comforts and necessaries, it was their duty therefore to commence the new settlement and by their industry and diligence compensate for the liberality of their proprietors, complainants were satisfied and returned home.<sup>435</sup>

This rarely stated 'contract' that the Fiscal believed existed between slave and master was not as extensive as the contract the slaves believed they had, for the latter expected something considerably more from their owners than the simple provision of creature comforts. In the Fiscal's mind, slaves should "compensate ... the liberality of their proprietors" with their slave labour, and perform that labour "where directed" by their owners. The slaves, on the other hand, believed the contract certainly involved the provision of labour, but only within their community and not "where they did not wish to go". The Fiscal, while understanding the slaves' reluctance to break up an established community, failed to understand that this break up was not the system of slavery to which the slaves felt they owed their compliance. Communities were vital to sustain many other slave relationships and allowed various kinship groups to coexist and interact in a structured fashion. Moreover they provided an individual with a sense of belonging and hence were vital to the slaves' acceptance of their position in society. Slaves' actions, as illustrated above, demonstrate how committed they were to take considerable risks in order to maintain community ties.

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<sup>435</sup> CB2, 18 August 1824.



## Shipmates and Countrymen

We have already met Mogge and Dido in previous chapters. Both women had come to complain, in their different ways, about problems of their own or their daughters' relations with men. As with the bonds between individual friends, the bond between husband and wife was perhaps not as easily sustained as the one between kin relations. Both cases indicate the strength and importance of a particular kin relationship, described by the women as 'shipmates'. Dido had been concerned about the good name of herself and her daughter within their community on Golden Grove, and this good name had come under attack from another kin group within the estate, headed by a coloured woman and her son John. To confirm that she was a person acting in a culturally responsible way, Dido described how she had made her decision regarding her daughter when she said that "I went and consulted my shipmates about it".<sup>436</sup> By having included her fictive kin relations in her decision-making Dido thus placed that decision above community reproach. With approval and support from her kin, she had validated her actions.<sup>437</sup> When Mogge on Vryheid had reported her husband for stealing coffee, she had done so only after she had first "told her ship mate, Aga the driver". Mogge clearly thought that such a consultation was necessary, which suggests both that marriage structures could not be arbitrarily broken and that in slave society individuals frequently sought the advice of kin over important decisions.

Together with collective friendships or communal bonds described by the plantation communities, the extended network of shipmates provided slaves with a

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<sup>436</sup> CB3, 13 June 1827.

<sup>437</sup> CB3, 13 June 1827.

considerable resource of support and one which could transcend the bounds of their community. But the corollary was also true – if a slave found himself or herself<sup>438</sup> outside such a network, the consequences were isolation, and the possibility of persecution, not just from the community of slaves, but also from managers, who would find it infinitely easier to take exemplary action against an outsider than against a slave who had the backing of the community. The case of Woensdag illustrates the point. Woensdag on Nieuw Hoop brought a complaint against the manager on 7 January 1825. The manager had allegedly punished Woensdag unjustly. Woensdag began his plaint by outlining the events that led up to this unjust treatment at the hands of the manager:

[W]e worked in the field to eleven, we carried Plantains home, after one we went in the field again. We worked till four, we went home. I was sweating and went to wash in the back dam trench and I drank in some water. Driver asked me where do you come from, I said I have been no where, I went only to wash. He said when you are at work you must not turn about. I said when I feel hot and thirsty I must wash and drink, I then feel strong to finish my work. The driver said, oh, I know you, you are a lazy bugger and constantly going to the Fiscal to complain and whether you are on or off the estate we don't care. He kept on cursing me, I made no reply, but continued working and finished with the rest, after ... the driver told the manager what passed in the field.<sup>439</sup>

The driver indicated that Woensdag was a known layabout, and one who had probably let all the gang down many times. Even through the mouth of Woensdag, the driver seemed genuinely concerned about Woensdag's behaviour and the driver's interaction with Woensdag represented far more than a casual reprimand. The driver, by saying that "we [that is the gang] don't care" if Woensdag was on or off the estate, implied that the gang considered Woensdag useless to their communal

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<sup>438</sup> The majority of cases seem to involve men, with few woman portrayed as complete outsiders.

<sup>439</sup> CB2, 7 January 1825.

need of shared responsibility for work. Sharing the workload and cooperating with the one another would have been vital to ameliorate the conditions of the gang's work. By acting as a cohesive and responsible gang, and sharing the work required to satisfy the needs of the plantation enterprise, the slaves were able to regulate and control their lives as workers. A character acting as an individual, with his own rather than the group's well being at heart, was a threat to the rest of the gang. In such cases the gang was only too willing to hand over the 'outsider' for punishment. Woensdag himself made his status on the plantation clear:

[After work] we went home, we were called to drink rum, as the Negroes said they did not care about me, I would not go to drink rum with them. However when they began to dance, I joined them also. The Negroes pushed me out of the dance finding I was a poor fellow without a mother or family. I left home and went to another estate to dance.<sup>440</sup>

By his own admission, Woensdag was not popular with the other slaves on his estate, and note too the stigma he suffered for not having attained any kinship ties in the colony. To be without a 'mother' or 'family' was to be without any kind of network of kin. We can only speculate on how or why Woensdag was unable to form any kind of kinship bonds, and had thus become an outsider who had to live on the periphery of community life. To such an individual the allure of less personal social structures was strong, as they were to Woensdag:

I went to Mr. Dewar's and returned to the estate at night. I waited till day, clean and went to massa wishing him good morning. He said good morning. I wanted to tell him what passed. He said no, go away. Monday morning they were going to flog me having been locked up in the stocks the day before. I saw they were preparing to flog me with caracaras and the whip. I said, massa I have not stolen nor given impudence why am I to bear a double punishment? Massa said, oh yes, I want to give you a good flogging and then you may go to the Fiscal or anywhere else, I don't care. I said if I go to the Fiscal

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<sup>440</sup> CB2, 7 January 1825.

suppose he flog me, he can't do it without hearing what I have to say. I want to tell you my story but you won't hear it. He said, never mind and ordered them to tie me. I laid down already the rope was round my wrist but finding it slack I pulled and started and got away in the bush. I did not wish to remain there, I would go to town, there are plenty people who want Negroes, and as they say I am bad, let them put me up at Vendue. I am there by myself, but I cannot nor will not go back to the estate. If I go I will go to the bush.<sup>441</sup>

Woensdag had tried to appeal to the 'neutral' authority of the manager, but the manager was probably anything but neutral. In the context of a cohesive working community, the manager was as much a part of the gang as were the slaves, and he would have known the extent of Woensdag's isolated position within the community, something Woensdag was only too well aware of himself. Woensdag was upset that the manager refused to let him tell his story, and so told the manager that even if the Fiscal did flog him, he would have at least offered him the courtesy of hearing his tale. Such recognition, even the dispassionate recognition of the legal system, was important to Woensdag. For a man without a voice within the local community it was perhaps a consolation to know that he had a voice somewhere in the colony.

The testimony of the manager, P. A. Bueseler, further illustrates Woensdag's position as an outsider, and one who was consistently running away, escaping perhaps not so much the plantation labour system, as the plantation community:

Complainant is a young healthy strong negro but always backward in his work, however. Since I have been on the property as manager and attorney, a period of ten months, he has never been flogged or put in the stocks. He is now present and I call on him to deny this assertion if he can. At breakfast time on the Friday I went home, what passed between him and driver I did not witness, in the evening the driver reported that Woensdag and another negro Dingsdag had been working at one head together. That Dingsdag had finished his row and Woensdag only two or three trees. The driver asked why he did not get on better and was answered neither you nor the overseer nor the manager shall speak to me this way. The driver knew very well he Woensdag did not talk long before he ran away. The driver said yes, I

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<sup>441</sup> CB2, 7 January 1825.

know, in master Mr. Caloner's time you frequently ran away and I don't care and if you was altogether off the property it would be the better. He was a bad character.<sup>442</sup>

The manager's testimony, in essence, reiterates Woensdag's own version of the events in everything but that he had failed to complete his share of the task with a co-worker Dingsdag. A 'bad character' for the manager and the driver might well have been the same in this case – both would have had a stake in the smooth running of the plantation, for the benefit not just of the owners, but also of themselves and the whole community. Rogue slaves were only a little less troublesome for workers than were rogue managers. Bueseler continued:

On Monday the 27<sup>th</sup> Woensdag came to my door. I had not seen him during the holidays. He told me good morning. I told him I was quite surprised he knew me, that I had not seen him since Friday and therefore to go away. The driver then came up and said if Woensdag was not punished for his conduct on the Friday towards him (the driver) that his authority in the field would be entirely done away.<sup>443</sup>

The driver's authority manifested itself in a particular way on the plantations of Berbice. His position lay between the roles of junior manager and shop steward, and he needed to keep one foot firmly in each camp. By the slaves, he was expected to be more an arbitrator. By the manager, he was expected to be more of a deputy to the manager's authority. Drivers occupied the middle ground between management and workers. At all times, however, they were very much a part of their community, and lived among the other workers of the estate. The constant bargaining and negotiating between management and workers was mediated in most cases through the auspices of the driver. The driver's authority was closely linked to the shared workload of the community. Woensdag, a "young healthy strong negro" was not

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<sup>442</sup> CB2, 7 January 1825.

<sup>443</sup> CB2, 7 January 1825.

doing his share, and the gang would have noticed (particular Dingsdag in this case). For the negotiated workload to continue the driver would have had to crack down on those who did not pull their weight, such as an outsider like Woensdag. The driver's appeal to the manager to punish Woensdag reflected perhaps not just his concern for his own authority, but also the gang's desire to see that no individual got away with doing less than the others, which would mean the rest of the gang having to work harder to compensate.

Bueseler continued his testimony, providing more information about Woensdag:

On Tuesday morning I directed the driver to bring him before the door intending to give him a few lashes. He laid down quietly but before the driver tied him up he escaped and ran away. That was the morning of the 28<sup>th</sup> December and I learn from undersheriff he did not come to prefer a complaint till the morning of Wednesday the 5<sup>th</sup> inst. He was consequently absent nine days roving about.<sup>444</sup>

Woensdag may be described as the consummate individual. But within Berbice society, that was obviously not an enviable position to hold. On the evidence of the manager and the driver, Woensdag was portrayed as a troublemaker, continually avoiding work and running away. Woensdag's behaviour was not indicative of an individual's struggle against the oppressiveness of slavery, but of sociopathy. Years after the end of slavery a character such as Woensdag would become little more than the neighbourhood lout.

While the bond between shipmates could be described as an entirely fictive-kin relationship, the same cannot be said for the relationship between 'countrymen'. The term countrymen referred to those people with whom an individual shared a common tribe or region in Africa. Such bonds were thus not 'fictive', in that the individuals

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<sup>444</sup> CB2, 7 January 1825.

involved could well have been part of some shared kinship group, even if they did not specifically know anything about such a bond. The term crops up regularly in the documents, often mentioned in a casual rather than a descriptive fashion. Its use, therefore, was normative in the colony, and one that did not need further enunciation. For example, when the man Bethune from plantation Tain complained of excessive whipping, he mentioned that his “countryman Charles counted the number of lashes also”, informing us that as a countryman of Bethune, Charles felt himself responsible to support Bethune before the authorities.

Although slaves constituted the overwhelming majority of unfree labour within Berbice during the 1820s, there also existed indentured servants, both black and white.<sup>445</sup> One such “African black man” called Sanya brought a complaint over unjust punishment after a vocational dispute with his manager, McWatt:

I was come to you as the master I first had when I came to the country and because I know that if any wrong is done some one they come to you to complain. When I lived under you on my first arrival in the colony you put me to work with your head carpenter and I lived well and behaved myself good. You sent me to Mr. Walker where I was never well. Mr. Walker first put me under Baas Moses, he removed me and placed me under Daniel, then I was put under the manager McWatt who not only beat but kicked me about my body, stomach and all about saying I did not want to learn work.<sup>446</sup>

The complaint continued at some length outlining Sanya’s tale of vocational difficulties whilst working for McWatt. But the details of the case are not nearly as interesting as the testimony of Sanya who described the various relationships he drew upon to assist him during his punishment’. We pick up the story after Sanya was placed in the stocks:

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<sup>445</sup> See CB3, 15 June 1827 for an instance of a white servant.

<sup>446</sup> CB2, 29 July 1825.

I had got nothing to eat nor drink of water all that night. Next day at two o'clock little Daniel brought me some foe foe that was given me by one of my comrades, it was not by Mr. Walker nor Mr. McWatt providing.<sup>447</sup>

At this point, it was one of Sanya's workmates or 'comrades' who came to assist him by bringing him foe-foe. Sanya continued:

I remained all ... Saturday ... in the stocks, ... Sunday night I got nothing to eat the whole of that day. Sam my countryman came to see me, I said 'you see I am a new negro and how they do me I have nothing to eat, you belong to the Fiscal and I belong to him too, if he know I had nothing to eat he would talk about it'. Sam then sat down and roasted plantains for me.<sup>448</sup>

The support of his countryman was not haphazard. He had made a point of coming to see Sanya, and such support was critical to Sanya's comfort. When the allowances were distributed these too were managed by Sanya's countrymen:

[My] allowance ... was taken by my countryman, but I could not cook or dress it, being confined in the stocks. He [Mr. Walker] never made anyone cook or dress it for me and therefore I was fed only [by] my country people.<sup>449</sup>

By his own estimation Sanya was a 'new negro'. But he was also an indentured servant, not a slave. He may well have entered the colony only quite recently, and perhaps had come voluntarily directly from Africa.<sup>450</sup> The Fiscal described Sanya as an "African", and had he come much earlier he would surely have come as a slave. The difference between a slave and a black indentured servant, however, hardly mattered in Berbice. He was not white, and so had to form kin relations with other 'negroes', whether slave, free, or in between like himself. It was not important what his designation was, what was important was his kin structure. In this case, the

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<sup>447</sup> CB2, 29 July 1825.

<sup>448</sup> CB2, 29 July 1825.

<sup>449</sup> CB2, 29 July 1825.

<sup>450</sup> Sanya was clearly from Africa, and as an indentured servant must have made some kind of contract to come to Berbice. His testimony and portrays himself as an apprentice desirous of learning his trade as a Carpenter.



countrymen helped him through his punishment and supported him in his application to the Fiscal for redress.<sup>451</sup> Retaining, or in some cases regaining,<sup>452</sup> African bonds could not have been very easy or straightforward, and the process would have been affected more by the vicissitudes of the slave trade leading up to settlement on a plantation, than by the institution of slavery which continued beyond that point. The dispersal and fragmentation of such kin structures survived only as chance dictated.

### Spiritual life

Historians today discuss the quantity and quality of African cultural traditions to have survived the middle passage. The managers and overseers of early nineteenth century Berbice, however, probably only discussed their excess. This was especially so when local managers and officials had to deal with Obeah. It is fascinating to speculate on what troubled many managers about the practice of Obeah. Apart from open rebellion, nothing was treated more seriously. As Emilia Viotti da Costa has remarked, “for whites, ‘obeah’ was a dangerous practice that had to be extirpated”.<sup>453</sup> Philip Morgan notes an eighteenth century South Carolina law that made the practice of Obeah a capital offence.<sup>454</sup> The practice of Obeah would have been associated with slave independence, clandestine meetings, and cultural solidarity – all considered dangerous by managers for reasons of security and control. However, the

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<sup>451</sup> Both parties in this case received some admonishment from the Fiscal (CB2, 29 July 1825).

<sup>452</sup> Perhaps such as attempted by the “free black lad” Frederick who adopted for his surname “McCongoo”, a colourful mixture of two cultural traditions, (CB3, 27 July 1827).

<sup>453</sup> Da Costa, *Crowns of glory*, p.110.

<sup>454</sup> Morgan, *Slave counterpoint*, p.623.

reactions of many Europeans to Obeah suggest that the fear went beyond just these concerns, perhaps indicating a reluctant respect for its perceived power. Jerome Handler and Kenneth Bilby note that “for whites, 'Obeah' became a catch-all term for a range of supernatural-related ideas and behaviours that were not of European origin and which they heavily criticized and condemned”. Moreover, whites “confused and misunderstood many of its features”.<sup>455</sup> Ironically, Obeah acquired one power it would never have possessed in Africa: that of character assassination. For example, the “free black woman” Kate McDonald, in order to undermine the credibility of a complaint made against her, testified that her slave Mary Anne had “something to do with Obeah”.<sup>456</sup>

The seriousness of Obeah dictated that any summary punishment for its practice by a manager on a plantation was often inappropriate. Thus, it was rarely mentioned in the punishment record books. Where the practice was definitely discovered or suspected, the case was referred by the manager to the Fiscal for official prosecution. The attorney of plantation Denticheem brought such a “charge of Obeah” before the Fiscal on 17 June 1819 against Hans, a slave working on plantation Beerenstein. Hans had been ‘hired’ as a practitioner of Obeah by the residents of Denticheem to investigate several recent and mysterious deaths among their community. The residents on the estate suspected that someone on the estate was secretly practicing Obeah by poisoning.<sup>457</sup> Frederick, the head carpenter, relates the story:

[O]n Saturday night he was wakened by the head driver January, who told him to come to his house. On arriving there he found all the men,

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<sup>455</sup> Jerome S. Handler and Kenneth M. Bilby, “On the early use and origin of the term 'Obeah' in Barbados and the Anglophone Caribbean”, *Slavery and Abolition*, V22(2), August 2001, p.87.

<sup>456</sup> CB3, 28 December 1826. See also CB2, 21 September 1825.

<sup>457</sup> CB1, 17 June 1819.

women and children before January's house. January said, that so many deaths had occurred that he had sent for a man to put every thing to rights; this man was Hans. January then took ram's horn from above the door and poured a little rum in it, and drank it, saying "that he wished to have the bad people off the estate, and every body must listen well." Hans sang his country song; January drank a second time out of the horn, ... a bottle of rum was on a table, also a wine glass. Hans pushed the latter off the table and broke it: January got vexed, saying, "this is the second glass you have broken." I [Frederick] said, "never mind, don't get vexed, as you sent for the man; if you want a glass I'll give you one." I sent for one; January directed a dram be given to the officers. Hans, after singing some time, said he wanted a young girl; he had placed a white feather in the head of all the children. He took a girl named Eve, and lay down on the ground, the girl next to him. She was, however, much alarmed and cried. He then took Gabriel, and she also lay on the ground with Hans. He then got up and said, "these children should point out the persons who administered the poison on the estate." He began to sing a country song, and every one must join the chorus.<sup>458</sup>

From this part of Frederick's testimony we learn that Hans was probably not 'countryman' to Frederick because the song Hans initially sang was "his [Hans's] country song". Later, however, when Hans again "began to sing a country song", he had demanded that "every one must join the chorus", implying that he had expected everyone would have known that particular song. We also learn that within their community there was a very definite recognition of rank among the people, with the dram of rum only offered "the officers".<sup>459</sup> More importantly we find that such an African ritual was so universally recognised and accepted, even though it was probable that about a third of the adults present were born in Berbice.

Frederick continued his statement with a lengthy description of the ritual. Hans put "grass in the water and sprinkled their faces" and then "every body was directed to dance", and soon the "negroes became as if crazy; some threw themselves in the mud – others jumped; they that were the most turbulent were flogged with the wild

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<sup>458</sup> CB1, 17 June 1819.

<sup>459</sup> CB1, 17 June 1819. The use of the term "officers" is perhaps a translational by the clerk of the more common term "headman" used in other testimonies.

canes by Lindsay Harry, by order of Hans, and recovered; others more furious, and not recovered from the stripes of Lindsay Harry, Hans struck with bamboo, and they immediately recovered.” At this point Frederick told Hans that though he was not afraid, he “did not like this sport”. And for good reason, because a little while later one of the women, Venus, who had not been fully “recovered” by the two floggings, pointed out Frederick as the culprit of the poisonings.

Venus was quite as a crazy person ... [she] danced in the circle, and coming up to me said, I was the bad man on the estate. I said to Bernard, because we are eldest on the estate, and that such things were never practised by us, that they want to remove me.<sup>460</sup>

There is the unmistakable hint of cultural resistance in the actions of Venus toward Frederick. Though Frederick was recognised by his community as a ‘head man’ and an elder, it was a status that had come his way via the authority of the wider free Berbice society, rather than from slave society. Hans, having come into his leadership among slaves as a recognised master of African ritual thus provided Venus with an alternative leader, and so challenged Frederick with the intention of trying to remove him. Venus later remembered little of what had happened, and did not recall naming Frederick as the poisoner. But the fact that Frederick perceived of its probability is more telling than whether his interpretation was correct – for him to have made such an interpretation informs us that Frederick was aware of such sentiments within his community. When Frederick’s house was damaged by the mob looking for poison, it was to the overseer he would appeal for assistance.

Venus, in her testimony, admitted that she became possessed and that her “head began to turn, as if I were mad”, and this was the “first dance she ever saw, whose

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<sup>460</sup> CB1, 17 June 1819.

heads turned in such a manner”, hinting that she had been to few in her time. She also confirmed that the songs and dances were familiar to the people, and even named one, “Hans sang the dance called Water Mamma dans”. As to the accusations, she claimed, “I am not aware what I did ... I was in hysterics; constantly laughing, although nothing was said to make me laugh”. Later she went back to January’s house where she saw Hans “lying on the floor, apparently in a fit; he was shaking and trembling much”. The Fiscal, perhaps struggling to explain her behaviour, asked if she was a rum drinker, which she denied.<sup>461</sup>

Interestingly this mass gathering of slaves had passed unnoticed by the manager or the overseers. The overseer Mr. Boaz only became aware of the operation, which had even included the drivers of the estate, when Frederick “came crying to ... complain that the negroes were breaking open his house, and digging up the ground, accusing him of being a poisoner”. However, according to W. Ross, the attorney, the commotion had been noticed by some people outside the estate:

[T]he minds of the people were in such a state of ecstasy, and conducted themselves as possessed to that degree as to attract the attention of three gentlemen passing who came in and inquired the cause of this uncommon agitation, just as Frederick was reporting the circumstances to the overseer.<sup>462</sup>

Boaz reported to Ross the state of the people when he arrived on the scene:

It appeared that the minds of the negroes must have been greatly agitated, they having thrown themselves on the ground, biting the grass, tearing the earth with their hands, and conducting themselves like maniacs.<sup>463</sup>

The overseer quickly reported the incident and subsequently received instructions to apprehend Hans the next day, and so Boaz went with the stable boy, William, to

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<sup>461</sup> CB1, 17 June 1819.

<sup>462</sup> CB1, 17 June 1819.

<sup>463</sup> CB1, 17 June 1819 (W. Ross testimony).

apprehend Hans, but William “was afraid to do so”, leaving Boaz to tackle Hans on his own.<sup>464</sup> Hans was taken to the Fiscal and locked in the gaol. The Fiscal did not record any finding in the case, but his voice resonated in the answers witnesses gave to questions obviously put to them. For example, we learn that the Fiscal was eager to discredit the notion that Hans may have possessed any real magic. Pompadore, the wife of Frederick, stated that the child used in the ritual, Gabriel, who had had a “salemporis”<sup>465</sup> draped over her head and held a bowl of water in her hands, was placed next to a hole dug near Frederick’s house. Hans then removed the salempore and “the pot appeared to contain a ram’s horn, some fluid, and the bones of some animal”. He then claimed that “the horn, &c. came out of the hole”. The Fiscal must have asked who witnessed this because Pompadore replied, “all the people were present”, but then admitted that “nobody saw these things come out of the hole”.<sup>466</sup>

Within this case lies an essential spiritual and cultural paradox. The behaviour of the people on Denticheem clearly indicated that they were enthralled, even entranced, by the ceremony – evidence that it was considered both powerful and important. Even Frederick had, until he became the ‘victim’ of the ritual, participated to the extent that he had collected the contributions from the people for Hans. On the other hand, the community was not so immersed in the belief that its members refused later to bring evidence against a recognised leader of that belief structure, Hans. Thus the tension hinted at by Frederick’s testimony, between a remembered and sustained African cultural tradition and the New World order of a ‘creole’ cultural formation, can be taken as a dynamic of Berbice society at a time

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<sup>464</sup> CB1, 17 June 1819.

<sup>465</sup> The salempore was a cotton cloth made in India and exported to the West Indies.

<sup>466</sup> CB1, 17 June 1819.

when most adult inhabitants were still in their first generation of residence in the colony.

The tension between old African and new Creole cultural traditions can be seen in the quite ambiguous status that some African customs had in Berbice, and this was especially so with the institution of Obeah. For some slaves Obeah was a custom they wished had stayed in Africa. Several cases suggest that while it commanded respect and fear, it did not necessarily command acceptance, and could easily become an unwelcome influence on the plantation and in the community. One such case occurred some three years after the case of Hans, and again involved the plantation Denticheem. Tobias was travelling from plantation Friends to plantation Denticheem when he claimed to have seen a flamingo in a trench. He killed it with a stick, only to then discover it was really a goose, for which he was “very sorry”. Having already killed it, however, “he could not help being mistaken”. Then some “negroes came up to him, and tied him and carried him to the manager”. He was consequently locked in the stocks for “near two months, with an allowance of four plantains and a bottle of water per day”. At one time he got a fever and asked for some extra water but was refused. He was therefore “under the necessity of drinking his own urine; and if he had not made his escape he would have been in the stocks until now, and God knows how long he would have been kept in”.<sup>467</sup>

But the people on Denticheem had a somewhat different version of events. John claimed that Tobias had approached him very early in the morning, at about one o’clock, and had asked for Adonis. A few hours later, Adonis heard “a noise in the

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<sup>467</sup> CB1, 4 September 1822. Tobias's mention of God is interesting considering that he was to be accused of practicing Obeah.

stock-house” and so took hold of Tobias and brought him to John who then took him to the overseer Boaz. Adonis claims to have heard a watchman calling out and “on going to see what was the matter, he met a man covered with mud near the fowl-house, whom he immediately recognized to be Tobias ... he was quite naked”. The following morning, Tobias’s “hat and clothes were found on a bench at the fowl-house, along with a dead goose, which it is supposed he must have killed”. He had initially only received a light punishment for killing the goose, but then Adonis claimed that Tobias was “practicing obeah on the estate”, and induced the manager to punish Tobias more severely. Tobias, however, was able to break free from the stocks and escaped. The attorney, the manager and the overseer all claimed that Tobias was a “very bad character, and disliked by all the other negroes on the estate”. Indeed he was so unpopular that he was “sold at public vendue, and not allowed to return to the plantation”. Perhaps with the memory of Hans still in their minds, the folk on Denticem were happy to be rid of an Obeah man, as was the management, which had sold the offending slave off the estate.

In another case, a one-legged ostler working for Dr. Duggin complained of unjust and excessive punishment, but then was subsequently himself charged with practicing Obeah. The ostler asserted that he had been beaten with his own crutch, and that though he understood that “[w]hite people purchase negroes to work”, he had emphasised that “no white man is to kick and thump a poor negro with one leg”. In his defence, Duggin denied the charges of assault and portrayed the ostler as a “bad character”. Worse, the man was a “dealer in obeah” and that “all his negroes



have jointly requested he may not be allowed to return home.”<sup>468</sup> Obeah, then, occupied an uncertain position in slave society – a relic of Africa which perhaps sat incongruously within a matrix of social values the slaves of Berbice were still constructing. Such were the ambiguous feelings some slaves had towards Obeah, that while they might invite it in a time of need, they could just as quickly reject it if it proved unhelpful. On plantation Nigg, on the Corantyne Coast, this ambiguity was to have disastrous results for one of the plantation’s residents. When Samuel Hiles looked down upon the charred corpse of Mamadoe, he may well have cursed his rotten luck that this had happened on his last day as manager. The body was foetally curled in a bed of ashes that had been, until very recently, Mamadoe’s watch hut.<sup>469</sup> Hiles turned around and looked at the crowd of men and women which had gathered, and perhaps thought briefly about making some inquiries, but there was no point. He had been recently sacked and he would consequently leave the affair to Duncan Fraser, appointed as his replacement.<sup>470</sup>

Even without asking any questions, the sombre mood of the gang would have informed Hiles that this was no ordinary fire, and no ordinary death.<sup>471</sup> However, it was not his concern, and he undoubtedly had his own problems to consider: his sudden unemployment spelled an expensive period of idleness in New Amsterdam, until he found another job, not easy now with his battered reputation. He was unlikely to get a post as manager and would have to settle for an overseer’s position, usually the preserve of youngsters fresh from Britain. He turned away from the

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<sup>468</sup> CB1, 20 October 1823.

<sup>469</sup> Mamadoe was a watchman on the plantation walk and kept a watch hut to use at night while on duty (CB2, 8 November 1824).

<sup>470</sup> CB2, 8 November 1824.

<sup>471</sup> In the period 1819 to 1822 there were but 3 murders. With slave deaths over the same period at 2,649.

smouldering ground and handed a note to Watson, one of the drivers, and told him to take it to Duncan Fraser who currently managed Kilcoy. Perhaps he took one last look at his workplace, fuzzy now in the pall of smoke and the bleary morning glare, before he left.<sup>472</sup> At first, the death of Mamadoe was thought to have been an accident, and hence the Fiscal's investigation was slow to get going. It was nearly two weeks before the Fiscal made his investigation. Though Samuel Hiles had been manager when Mamadoe had died, it was left to Duncan Fraser to explain why the death had become suspicious.

I received a note from Mr. Samuel Hiles late manager informing me that the remains of the negro Mamadoe was found in a hut aback of the plantain walk where he was one of the watchmen was found burnt to death and the hut burnt to the ground.<sup>473</sup>

After inspecting the site twice, Fraser was approached by the driver Watson.

Watson pointed out some spots of blood which were visible on some bamboo's laying between the place where the hut had stood and the watchman Mamadoe's fire place where it is said he was in the habit of keeping. The spots of blood were also seen on some dry plantain leaves near the place, partly burnt and covered with ashes, there were some more plantain leaves partly tied and thrown one side. I directed them to be brought to the house and to be kept. I also directed some of the bamboo's to be kept. It appears that this blood had been discovered by the negroes after I left the spot in the morning.<sup>474</sup>

Even at his stage, the death had not been considered suspicious and Fraser had not made any approach for official help. The people on the estate were the ones who brought the suspicious circumstances of the death to Fraser's attention. Some days later more evidence emerged:

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<sup>472</sup> Samuel Hiles eventually took a post as overseer on plantation Golden Grove. He did not last long there either, however, being sacked for improper sexual conduct with the slaves on the plantation (CB3, 15 June 1827).

<sup>473</sup> CB2, 8 November 1824.

<sup>474</sup> CB2, 8 November 1824.

I think on the Friday following a large bludgeon was found in the cotton field, discovered by some of the negroes whilst picking. There is apparently some stain on it from the colour altho it is difficult to ascertain whether it is blood or not. There is also apparently a few grey hairs attached to a part of the wood (bruised or splintered) by which the hairs are held. The man Mamadoe was I understand grey headed (I do not know this to my personal knowledge). The day previous to the death of Mamadoe he was in good health as far as I know he was not a prime man, but if he had been sick, I certainly would have heard of it as the estate is so nearly situated to where I live.<sup>475</sup>

By now, Fraser too was suspicious and he made enquiries among members of the community at Nigg who provided him with a possible suspect and motive for the murder:

The gang have a suspicion that Mamadoe was murdered by Rhina belonging to this property. That after the murder he Rhina laid the body in the hut and then put fire to it. Intending to consume the same and thereby prevent the detection of his deed. They ground their suspicion on the following reasons;

Mamadoe was considered by them as a sort of doctor. One of the women was sick she applied to him for advice and assistance. He gave her something and she is said to have recovered, but being again taken ill she went to him a second time, but he refused assisting her.<sup>476</sup>

The "sort of doctor" referred to was an African doctor, and it is worth noting that the manager recognised that in the slaves' eyes Mamadoe had some kind of qualification.

Fraser continued:

Mamadoe directed him to look for some kind of weed or root which he described but the husband not finding it Rhina tied Mamadoe's hands. On the intercession, however, of some of them, they were loosened. Rhina then said I will give you this moon to cure her and if you do not do so in that time, I will know what to do to you.<sup>477</sup>

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<sup>475</sup> CB2, 8 November 1824. It is interesting to note the expectation of Fraser to have heard about an individual slave's illness, considering he lived on Kilcoy and that between Kilcoy and Golden Grove there were 274 slaves.

<sup>476</sup> CB2, 8 November 1824.

<sup>477</sup> CB2, 8 November 1824.

It is clear that though Mamadoe was in some trouble with some of the people on the estate, he did have some supporters who were able to intervene, untie the hands that Rhina had bound, and testify that

Rhina has been heard to say that in his country the way they treat Obiah man is to kill them, put them in their house and set fire to it.<sup>478</sup>

Rhina had been prepared to entertain an African custom so long as it worked. When it had failed to cure his countryman's wife, however, he had then decided to get rid of Mamadoe, and presumably Obeah, from the estate. Rhina's alleged action tells us that he still thought that Mamadoe was an Obeah man, even if an ineffective one, because he had enacted the ritualised death of an Obeah man which had been practised in his homeland. Fraser also presented evidence, given to him by Rhina's co-workers, that Rhina had left his watch on the night of the murder.

Another slave, John Campbell, who was a countryman to Mamadoe, also gave evidence. Mamadoe's former wife had come to John crying that Rhina "had tied ...[John's] countryman's hands and taken him to the driver". John Campbell then "went to the driver Watson's house and learnt the man was tied because he had not cured Rhina's countryman's wife who was sick". From this evidence, the case now resembled an internal communal feud between two sets of 'countrymen'. At this point Mamadoe was advised by his countrymen to go and tell the manager, but apparently only told the manager that his hands hurt from being tied – consequently the manager placed Mamadoe as watchman. John Campbell continued.

Another Sunday I heard Rhina say the moon is passed already, Mamadoe has done nothing for that woman and I will go and tie his hands again. I said if you go to do that, you must do it before me, and I went to the old man's hut and remained there all that day. Rhina

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<sup>478</sup> CB2, 8 November 1824.

however did not come. Rhina's countrymen were getting vexed about it. Rhina then replied I don't want to keep dirty people in the house, in my country such sort of people are tied, put in their house and the house then burnt. This was said in presence of Dragoon and plenty other people who heard him Rhina say so. On the Sunday previous to Mamadoe's death Rhina came aback from the Koker where he was watchman and Dragoon and Peter at the grind stone and I heard him Rhina say that as his country man did not trouble himself about his wife's story, he Rhina knew what to do, and to tell the husband to keep a dram for him for his trouble.<sup>479</sup>

John Campbell, a countryman to Mamadoe, could have been expected to support his kin and condemn Rhina, and so he did. Similarly, the testimony below from Dragoon, Rhina's countryman, should have supported Rhina. It is interesting to speculate whether the calling of these two witnesses, one with kin relations to Mamadoe and the other with kin relations to Rhina, was intended by the Fiscal to balance the evidence of these witnesses. If so, this would indicate a recognition by the Fiscal of the importance such kin relations as 'countryman' were to the slaves in Berbice. It may have been no coincidence that one man from each 'camp' was called, and that each witness clearly stated his kin relationships in the case, one to the victim and the other to the suspect.

Unfortunately for Rhina, the evidence that his countryman provided was not very helpful to his defence. Dragoon stated:

That he is a Congo country man to Rhina, that Rhina tied the hands of the old man Mamadoe because he would not do something for his countryman Tancred's wife. I heard of this and I therefore went to Rhina being an older man than him, and asked him what business he had to do so, it was not his wife.<sup>480</sup>

Dragoon was not only countryman to Rhina, he was also Rhina's elder. In any event, the case was referred to the court of criminal justice for prosecution. The testimony

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<sup>479</sup> CB2, 8 November 1824.

<sup>480</sup> CB2, 8 November 1824.

of the two slaves suggests that while the countryman kinship was strong, so too were feelings of communal responsibility. The plantation setting in this case included at least two countryman kinship groups co-existing within the one plantation community.

In the case of Mamadoe Obeah had been used as an alternative to European models of scientific medicine to find a cure for an intractable and persistent ailment. We saw in the case of Hans that it could also be used to provide information about evil spirits and subversive characters. However it also functioned to provide answers to mysterious and unfathomable events. This was certainly the case with Willem on plantation Maria and Agnes whom we met earlier in this chapter. Willem had sought help from an Obeah man on plantation Jeddy because he was being haunted by the ghosts of the three men he had been accused of accidentally killing.<sup>481</sup> In all cases the traditions of African spiritualism provided information and assistance on matters which were seen to be outside the capabilities of secular society. African spirituality could also be seen to have challenged Christian models of spiritual revelation. However, though exotic customs and spiritual rituals were mentioned regularly in the complaint and punishment records, Christianity almost never gets mentioned, except within official correspondence where the subject has been specifically raised.<sup>482</sup> Of course, that does not necessarily mean that it was unimportant to the residents of Berbice. After all, slaves who practised Obeah or indulged in African rituals such as drumming, both of which considered illegal in Berbice, were more likely to appear in records devoted to complaint and punishment than were slaves who went to Church

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<sup>481</sup> Willem had approached someone on plantation Jeddy to “get Obiah made” after having been held responsible by the manager, J. A. Dehnert, for the drowning of three other slaves. Willem wanted “to make Obiah to find out the cause of loss of those negroes” (CB2, 1 January 1824).

<sup>482</sup> There is one mention of God as above in the case of Tobias, but no others have been found.

on Sundays. While we would hear of a slave attending an Obeah ceremony, his attendance at the local missionary outpost would hardly have warranted a mention. Moreover those who had been formally converted to Christianity would have tended to be slaves unlikely to attract official or managerial attention.

According to John Wray, traditional African based spiritualism had some stiff competition by the mid 1820s in Berbice. The London Missionary Society had a well-established chapel, as noted by John Wray, the missionary in charge in Berbice. In a letter to the Protector of Slaves, David Power, Wray reported:

I am happy to say that the part of our chapel which is more particularly appropriated to the slaves was filled to excess last Sunday, chiefly from the country, and we have applications daily for Watts's Catechisms, and for the Union Sunday School Spelling Book. I think I have never seen so great a desire among the slaves to learn to read and to say the Catechism, as at present. We have numerous applications from the West Coast and Canje.<sup>483</sup>

It would be interesting to know how much the desire of the slaves to be able to read the Catechisms had to do with Christianity, and how much it had to do with the desire to be able to read. Nevertheless, the chapel and the London Missionary Society may have had a significant impact on the spiritual life of the people of the colony. The London Missionary Society was not the only Christian organization in Berbice, but not all the sects which operated churches in the colony administered to slaves. For example, the Lutheran Congregation owned and maintained plantation Augsburg,<sup>484</sup> a "fine estate here with upwards of 150 slaves"<sup>485</sup> but though its members had a church and a minister on the property "their slaves ... [were]

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<sup>483</sup> CB3, Letter from Wray to Power, 9 November 1826, p.162-164.

<sup>484</sup> This plantation was not the model of tolerance either, with some 19 slaves proffering complaints to the Fiscal. The plantation inflicted 49 punishments in the 8 months between Nov1826 and July 1827 (PB1, Augsburg).

<sup>485</sup> Note that the plantation actually had 181 slaves.

destitute of [religious] instruction". This situation was replicated by the Episcopal Church where the "case is the same".<sup>486</sup> The "English Church" did apparently provide some religious instruction but could not, when so asked by David Power, "furnish ... the list required".<sup>487</sup>

John Wray provided such a list and included 117 slaves who had been "sufficiently instructed in Religion to understand the nature and obligation of an Oath". All but 18 of the slaves, however, were working either for the Government (the Winkel Department), the Canje Ferry, or lived and worked in New Amsterdam. The 18 plantation workers came from just two plantations, Sandvoort with 4 slaves instructed and Vryheid with 15. There were a few others who attended chapel but were not included on the list for various reasons. It should also be noted that only some of the 117 slaves were baptized.<sup>488</sup> Whatever the exact number, the figures are not impressive, despite the upbeat nature of Wray's letter, especially as the instruction of religion had become a directive from the colonial authorities in London. Overall, the slaves in Berbice have shown a distinct ambivalence towards any form of spirituality, whether European or African in origin. That Obeah was feared and respected was certain, but as the cases above illustrate, it was also disliked and rejected by a great many slaves. The evidence of Christian beliefs exist – but with a similarly low profile and narrow application. Perhaps the cultural and social developments in Berbice at this time simply did not favour or facilitate deeply spiritual associations.

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<sup>486</sup> Wray to Power.

<sup>487</sup> CB3, Letter from Francis Whitfield to David Power, 4 November 1826, p.162.

<sup>488</sup> CB3, pp.165-166.



## Retirement and death

In *Without Consent or Contract*, Robert Fogel has analysed economic data to create a chart for the expected earnings that the average male slave brought to his owner in the American south in 1850. It showed a sharp rise after age 10, peaked around age 30 and then steeply declined as slaves entered old age. If a slave existed solely for the purpose of work, what happened when the person became too old to work? Whatever the actual figures for the earning capacity of slaves, it was axiomatic for owners that slaves living to old age would eventually undergo the financial metamorphosis from asset to liability.<sup>489</sup>

The place of the elderly had special significance in a society such as Berbice, made up as it was of workers with a primarily African rural background living under the control of capitalist European administrators. This juxtaposition led to a paradoxical status for old slaves. For a slave owner in London or Amsterdam, an old slave was next to 'worthless', while for the members of a community of African descended rural workers in Berbice, drawing on African cultural traditions, an old person was venerated and highly valued in their society. Yet, the status of the elderly was recognised not only by the other people within a community, but in many cases by management and officials as well. For example when the Protector of Slaves investigated a complaint from plantation Hampshire, the Protector referred to the older workers to test the veracity of the plaintiff's charges. The Protector noted that

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<sup>489</sup> Fogel, *Without consent or contract*, Figures 11 & 12, pp.69-70.

the plaintiff's "character from the elder negroes was, that she was a very troublesome and violent woman".<sup>490</sup>

For many slave owners and managers, however, an old and infirm slave presented the same problems as any recurring and unrecoverable expense. It must have been tempting for less scrupulous owners to provide as little as possible for the care and sustenance of the elderly, thereby not only saving money in the short term by having to provide less food and clothing, but also in the grim hope that they might die sooner and relieve them of any further expense whatsoever. For some, simply abandoning the slave might have seemed like a good option, as was purported to have happened in the case of Sam, an old and blind slave who had belonged to a woman who eventually left the colony. Sam complained:

I belong to the Widow Sander, formerly of this Colony, and as she is gone to live in Surinam I have no person to take care of me, that is to say, to find me food and clothing. I have been living for some time among my friends.<sup>491</sup>

Sam had then been taken to the barracks to be cared for by the government until some answer could be got from Mrs. Sanders. As it turned out Sam's story was not entirely straightforward, and provision had been made for him, but the important feature of the case was the concern the authorities had to see that slave owners fulfilled their obligations to old and retired slaves. Consequently, abandonment was not a realistic option for most slave owners, and the usual method of dealing with the elderly was to keep them working for as long as possible. Matt, for example, an aged slave on plantation Vryheid, complained that

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<sup>490</sup> CB3, 27 February 1827.

<sup>491</sup> CB3, 2 January 1827.

his advanced years, prevented his working as much as young people, and principally that he was more incapable of performing his task in rainy weather than in the dry season; that nevertheless his master ordered him to perform the same task as the others, and as he is by no means able to do what is required of him, he is continually flogged, which compels him to come and complain.<sup>492</sup>

A tactic pursued by some slave owners was to sell off an ageing slave and thereby recover at least a small amount of the slave's original value. This had the additional advantage of defraying the future costs of support once the slave became entirely useless. For this strategy to work, however, it meant finding a purchaser silly enough to buy a slave at the end of his or her working life. Such seemed to have been the case with John Moore, proprietor of plantation No.37 on the West Coast of Berbice. He had bought Adam only recently at public Vendue, only to find that the man was not fit to work. Adam brought a complaint to the Fiscal as "an old infirm negro". He complained that Moore "deals very hard with him in consequence of his advanced age and infirm state". In reply, John Moore explained the dilemma he found himself in after he purchased the slave at vendue:

Finding him unequal to do work of any consequence [I] put him to mind fowls, ducks and etc. but the old man will do nothing, having a great objection to reside on the coast.<sup>493</sup>

In this case a compromise was reached, the Fiscal noting that the manager would

be most happy to dispose of him [and] requests permission to allow him to remain in the jail yard until he can find a purchaser. Adam makes same request which was permitted.<sup>494</sup>

There were relatively few complaints from slaves about problems of old age however. No specific category was created for such complaints and most were incorporated into the category of health. In the late 1820s, there would have been

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<sup>492</sup> CB1, 12 January 1821.

<sup>493</sup> CB2, 6 April 1825.

<sup>494</sup> CB2, 6 April 1825.

fewer than 700 slaves over the age of 60.<sup>495</sup> Nevertheless, the paucity of grievances indicates that there were probably few real problems. Where old women are mentioned in the documents they are usually involved in childcare or light community work, roles which neatly approximated the ones they might have expected to fill in Africa.

In many cases, slaves were relatively well treated by their owners once they had ceased to be able to work, and we cannot expect to hear about these cases in documents that deal primarily with complaint or punishment. Where they have been mentioned, it was usually because some difficulty arose from the arrangements, as with the case of Frederick Van der Brock, on plantation Denticem. He had formerly been the head carpenter on the estate, and on his 'retirement' his owner had bequeathed him an annuity of one joe every month. This he had saved and, when he became blind, was able to purchase a slave for 550 guilders to be his "eye sight", that is, to lead him around and look after him. The only reason we hear of the matter was because the manager of the plantation, William Ross, did not like Frederick's slave Jacob. A compromise was reached, however, whereby Frederick hired out his slave and hired in another to take his place.<sup>496</sup>

Slave concerns for their old age were not limited to considerations of welfare and treatment in retirement. They were also concerned about arrangements made for their death and burial. Such considerations are common to most societies. Whatever the spiritual beliefs of an individual were, these usually incorporated some kind of ritual of death and transformation, and this necessitated an adequate and dignified

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<sup>495</sup> See Table 1.2, Chapter One.

<sup>496</sup> CB3, 12 December 1826.

burial. Such concerns could affect an entire community, such as when the slaves of Highbury complained that they were required to work such long hours that when one of their co-workers, a woman called Samba, died she had to be “interred by strange negroes”. The manager was only able to allay the natural concern of the authorities by claiming that Samba had been “connected with a family on plantation Buses lust, and it being a holiday with them they came to bury her”. The social importance of the ritual remains evident no matter which version of the events was true. Imagine therefore the concern of Kate, who belonged to Mary Richards in New Amsterdam, when she found that her savings of “ten joes in dollars, which I was putting up in case of death to assist in buying me” had been stolen from her box by her mistress while she had been hired out in the country. The Protector of Slaves was also alarmed and referred the case to the Fiscal for prosecution. The contingencies and concerns of old age and death, however, should be put into perspective in a society such as Berbice where a potpourri of tropical illnesses and the spread of globally infectious diseases were far more likely to get you than was old age. Indeed, with fewer than 10 percent of all deaths coming about as consequence of old age or debility, to have got that far was in itself an achievement, and ultimately,<sup>497</sup> for most inhabitants of Berbice, it was life and not death that made the greatest demands on their consciousness.

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<sup>497</sup> Higman, *Slave populations*, Table S8.13.

## Close

The importance of kinship and familial networks in Berbice is difficult to reconcile with one of the key elements of Orlando Patterson's understanding of slavery, that of natal alienation. He claims, for example, that a slave "ceased to belong in his own right to any legitimate social order", and was not only "denied all claims on, and obligations to, his parents and living blood relations but, by extension, all such claims and obligations on his more remote ancestors and on his descendants".

Patterson then goes on to qualify this by saying that slaves did experience "informal social relations", but that these were not counted because "these relationships were never recognized as legitimate or binding", so that sexual unions were not "recognized as marriage", and that while parents were deeply attached to their children "the parental bond had no social support".<sup>498</sup> But these judgments imply qualitative assumptions about what differentiates an "informal" marriage from a "legitimate" one. As we saw in the previous chapter, at least in Berbice, slave marriage need not have conformed to European models to be considered legitimate by slave society. Moreover, when managers did become involved in marriage disputes they most commonly resisted casual dissolution, thereby legitimising and recognising some "binding" features of slave marriage. Neither is there any evidence that parental bonds in Berbice were any less supported than they would have been back in Africa, or would become following emancipation.

Far from resembling Patterson's "informal social relations", the evidence shows that neither the slaves nor the managers nor the administration treated these relations

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<sup>498</sup> Patterson, *Slavery and social death*, pp.5-6.

in such a fashion. Even had the authorities not recognised such relations, the slaves have indicated that they themselves did, and so the psychological damage from natal alienation could still not have occurred. In any case, such relations were commonly recognised by managers. That does not mean that the relations in the areas studied by Patterson did not exhibit symptoms of natal alienation, only that they did not exhibit these features in Berbice. Indeed, the prevalence and acceptance of fictive kinship bonds in the colony demonstrate a rapid recovery of natal identity by slaves in their first generation in Berbice. These bonds may not have been identical to those left behind in Africa, but they were certainly informed by the structures prevalent there. Moreover, there is no evidence to suggest that they were any less valued because they occurred in Berbice, or because the people concerned happened to be slaves.

More influential than Patterson's natal alienation to slave social relationships in Berbice were the effects of their interaction with a more diverse range of social ideologies. Social relations in Berbice were evolving: perhaps feeling their way between an emergent, Western, individualist world socio-economic structure and the traditional socio-economic structures of Africa. Western industrialization increasingly favoured broader, if less intimate and less dependent, relations based on politics, culture and race. For the inhabitants of Berbice, many of the expectations of the white administration were informed by such broader structures, and thus must have affected the expression of kin relations among the slaves. Notions of civic responsibility, for example, can sit uncomfortably with familial loyalty and such tensions were expressed in the documents. The evidence indicates, however, that most slaves in Berbice during the period covered in this study still relied more

heavily on African models of social relationships than on any from Europe. African social strategy favoured the formation of as many bonds as possible – familial, personal, communal, or fictive. Many of these bonds traded an individual's security and support from the group for his or her obligations to the group and its other members. In Europe the Protestant work ethic and the increasing reliance on individual responsibility structured around rigid judicial process had resulted in expectations of duty, not so much to the community or other individuals, but to an increasingly impersonal political and economic system. In Berbice the development of social structures attempted to reconcile the two forms, with the inevitable contradictions the marrying of two such different structures would bring.

When Willem on New Forest in the case reviewed earlier in this chapter complained about Cato, he was appealing to a structure of justice unrelated to interpersonal bonding, an arbitrary and dispassionate legal structure where the 'letter of the law' was more important than the bond of kinship. The fact that the majority of socially related grievances brought before the Fiscal were from individuals, with quite idiosyncratic complaints, suggests that such people were those who could not rely on the kinship network for support and were thus more likely to appeal to the 'impartial' judgment of the Fiscal. Slaves were repeatedly informed of specific rules and duties, which, at least in theory if not practice, were even handed, and above the ability of mere mortals to break. In any society there will be kin groupings, and there will be dispassionate social rules and laws that theoretically operate outside such kinship structures. It is a question of emphasis, of the relative influence of one to the other which would have marked out the differences between societies. From the documents, many slaves in Berbice were testing the waters of a system which placed



a greater emphasis on the formal structures of written law than they would have expected to find in Africa. The mere fact that so many slaves sought redress from the theoretically neutral authority of the British crown via the Fiscal's and the Protector's office suggests a widespread recognition of new forms of social interaction.

Cultural retention remains one for the most hotly debated issues within the historiography of New World societies, one of the many ghosts of slavery capable of haunting modern social life in the Americas. The cases of Mamadoe and of Hans reviewed above inform us that a great deal of African cultural practice survived the turbulent waters of the Atlantic. They also demonstrate, however, that African practices were already blending with ideas from the New World. Living cultures are dynamic, constantly developing as they react to such things as new information, technology, changing environments, altering climates or interactions with other societies. Africans coming to the new world did not bring over relics of an artifactual culture, but brought instead cultural resources based on their experience of dynamic societies in their previous homelands. Time and circumstances changed, and so cultures adapted. African-American culture in Berbice was no exception.

## **Chapter 6:**

### **Life outside slavery**

#### **Introduction**

In Berbice slaves left plantations with relative ease and moved about with a remarkable degree of freedom. Once slaves had left the plantation they were perhaps already in a kind of limbo, a transitory state between free and unfree. Taking the next step towards freedom by running away into the bush, however, was not a simple decision for a slave to make, and slaves rarely took it. There were also other methods to pursue a life outside of slavery which will be examined in some detail in this chapter. When looking at how a slave could avoid slavery, there is one premise we can take as given – all else being equal, all slaves would have preferred freedom over slavery. That does not, however, equate to a desire for freedom at any cost. The value of such alternatives to slavery as were available would have needed to exceed the personal, social and material costs involved in attaining those alternatives.

There were four principal alternatives to slavery available to slaves in Berbice during this period:

1. Manumission
2. Suicide
3. Going Bush
4. Revolution

## Manumission

As in most other Anglo-American slave administrations, the rate of manumission in Berbice was pitifully low. The numbers of those manumitted did increase after September 1826, when the new amelioration ordinances were introduced, but overall figures remained insignificant. In Table 6.1 below we find that from 1 November 1826 to 30 June 1827, just 72 slaves were manumitted. This is equivalent to an annual rate of just a half of one percent (0.5 percent). From the general population figures, we find that out of a total non-white population of 22,561 there were only 1,661 free coloureds, representing just 7.4 percent of the non-white population. Compared with the rates for neighbouring Brazil these figures were unimpressive. In the state of Minas Gerais in 1821, for example, there were 148,000 slaves but 206,000 free coloureds indicating a very high level of historical manumission.<sup>499</sup>

Consequently, with manumission so rare, it could not have been viewed by most slaves in Berbice as a promising alternative to slavery. Moreover, the majority of those manumitted (62.5 percent) achieved this from Deed of Gift, or special purchase by a benefactor, rather than from self purchase or purchase by a family member (37.5 percent). Thus, most slaves who were manumitted had had to rely on the generosity of others to achieve their manumission. Slaves would have been able to increase their chances by ingratiating themselves or having a close (often sexual) relationship with someone with the means to offer such generosity, but ultimately it would have

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<sup>499</sup> A. J. R. Russell-Wood, *The black man in slavery and freedom in colonial Brazil*, New York 1982, p.59. The figures for Brazil also indicate the level of integration of former slaves into Brazilian society, and the lower impact race played in personal advancement following manumission.

been a decision that the slaves themselves could not make. Ira Berlin has summed up the difficulties of having to rely on such chancy and idiosyncratic circumstances:

Meeting the terms of such flinty benevolence took enormous discipline and years of hard work.<sup>500</sup>

The full price of fostering benevolence, however, was not restricted to the loss of self esteem or pride involved in such behaviour. There was also the possible communal and kinship cost of such close association with a particular owner – the so-called ‘uncle Tom’ factor. Slaves seeking manumission would generally have preferred to purchase freedom independent of such benevolence. In the following Table 6.1 the manumission rates and purchase details for certain periods in Berbice are shown.

TABLE 6.1:  
MANUMISSIONS NOV 1826 TO JUN 1827, BERBICE.<sup>501</sup>

	<i>By Self or Family</i>	<i>By Gift or by Non Relative</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>% Self / Family</i>
<i>1 November 1826 to 31 March 1827 (5 months)</i>				
Number of manumissions	21	37	58	36.21%
Total paid for purchases by self/family	<i>f.</i> 18,530			
Av. paid by self/family per person	<i>f.</i> 882			
<i>1 April 1827 to 30 June 1827 (3 months)</i>				
Number of manumissions	6	8	14	42.86%
Total paid for purchases by self/family	<i>f.</i> 2,200			
Av. paid by self/family per person	<i>f.</i> 367			
Totals	27	45	72	37.50%

<sup>500</sup> Berlin, *Many thousands gone*, p.236.

<sup>501</sup> CO 116/143, pp.191 & 237. Note that the average price paid includes the amount paid for children. Amounts in guilders (*f.*).

Though self-purchase would seem to have obviated the need to engage in potentially demeaning behaviour, it did so only up to a point, because the owner still had to agree to the sale. Moreover, as the table shows, self purchase, or purchase by a family member, was expensive for a slave, with costs nearing 900 guilders for an average slave, ranging up to 2,600 guilders for a prime male. It was certainly possible for slaves to save money, but it would have required some considerable self discipline – and there were so many other attractions for one's money, attractions that could provide immediate and tangible amelioration to the conditions of a slave.

Such low rates weaken the argument proposed by some historians that the system of manumission was itself just another system of slave control. Robert Fogel, for example, has suggested that "manumissions, which may seem to be the negation of slavery, were sometimes actually part of the system of control".<sup>502</sup> For those slaves who chose to pursue benevolent manumission, this would certainly have been the case. But a majority of slaves did not pursue this course of action and hence the argument has only a limited application. Most slaves had no realistic chance of manumission, so the inducement was probably limited to those who worked closely with whites. We all make decisions based more on probability, rather than possibility, and the fact that it was possible to be manumitted affected decision-making by slaves to a far lesser degree than the low probability of achieving manumission. Having said that, manumission, had it been more readily available and easier to attain, would have represented the ideal way for a slave to gain freedom in a society still utilising slavery. Compared with escape, revolution or suicide, it

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<sup>502</sup> Fogel, *Without consent or contract*, p.194.

required the least disturbance to one's life, and allowed the manumitted person to remain among family, kin, and friends.

The explanation for the low manumission rate is complicated. In his report to Lieutenant Governor Beard, David Power, Protector of Slaves, made the observation that it was now much easier for slaves to be manumitted (since the slave amelioration ordinance of 25 September 1826), and that many of those manumitted were

made by persons who, for years, have been in the habit of working for their own and children's support, but who, from the expense attending manumissions under the former law, were unable to obtain the deed of enrolment.<sup>503</sup>

This would explain the apparent drop in the rate of manumission from the first 5 month period of 1 November 1826 to 31 March 1827 when a total of 58 slaves were manumitted, 21 of whom were self-manumissions, to the second 3 month period from 1 April 1827 to 30 June 1827 when only 14 slaves were manumitted, including 6 (all from one family) who were self-manumitted. This represents a drop of 60 percent in the manumission rate. Presumably then, the pent up demand accounted for the immediate surge in manumissions following the new laws. Most of those manumitted were working in Berbice in the "anomalous condition of society, neither being slaves nor legally free persons", that is, they were living and working independently from their owners but had not been able to secure manumission for bureaucratic reasons.<sup>504</sup> The factor of pent up demand therefore renders the long-term manumission rate at this time even lower than the figures suggest.

Finding explanations for the low rates of manumission is not easy, and five possible explanations will be offered here, though all of them are quite generalised:

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<sup>503</sup> CB3, Report, Power to Beard, 29 January 1827, p.151.

<sup>504</sup> CB3, Report, Power to Beard, 29 January 1827, p.151.

1. That the owners of slaves did not cooperate and/or actively resisted the practice.
2. It was in some way restricted by colonial administrators.
3. It was too expensive for the average slave.
4. Such freedom represented a low social priority.
5. The drawbacks of independence.

That owners resisted the manumission of slaves would seem to be almost axiomatic. With the slave trade at an end, and birth rates of slaves below those of death rates, then losing large numbers of slaves by manumission threatened the viability of estates dependent on slave labour. Even had that not been the case, many planters and estate managers thought that free coloureds were “great nuisances” in the colony.<sup>505</sup> No evidence has been found which could measure the attitudes of managers and owners to manumission, but it could safely be assumed to have been generally negative and resistive, except in the cases involving sexual partners, offspring, domestic workers, and city-dwelling slaves. Replacing a poor quality slave was relatively easy, but replacing a prime hand was difficult. Unfortunately it is not known how many of those manumitted were prime hands, and how many were domestic or elderly slaves, but with general numbers so low, and with women outnumbering men, it would be safe to assume that only a tiny number of those slaves manumitted were prime slaves.

The second cause is reinforced by David Power’s report that there were serious official impediments to manumission before the amelioration ordinance of September 1826. The report also informs us, however, that that impediment had been removed, so that, by 1827 we should have begun to see a rise in the rate of

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<sup>505</sup> Rodway, *History of British Guiana*, v2, p.298.

manumissions. Figures for a later period in Demerara indicate no great increase in the manumission rate, with an annual rate of just 0.37 percent for the six month period 1 November 1829 to 30 April 1830, lower than that for Berbice at the earlier period.<sup>506</sup>

The third reason was also supported by David Power. After overcoming owner resistance and navigating ponderous bureaucracy, the slave still had to jump the hurdle of crippling expense, either monetary or personal. Whether the slave saved the cash or invested in the effort of fostering benevolence, the price of manumission was high.

Which leads to the fourth explanation: for the price of manumission to be worth the effort then the value of manumission had to be correspondingly high. In monetary terms, if the manumission cost was 1,000 guilders, but its social value was more like 750 guilders, then it might not have seemed like such a bargain for those who had the necessary funds. No such computations would have been made, but the relative value of manumission to the cost of achieving it would have been a subconscious calculation used when assessing the option. And there were so many other things that could be done with the money, as when Friday, with the option of freedom, instead used his savings of 2,000 guilders to buy land.<sup>507</sup> Even to get that sum accumulated would have meant a continual denial of the little luxuries that could have softened the impact of slavery along the way.

Finally, the cost of manumission did not end with the transfer of the requisite funds to the slave owner. The newly freed slave was now an independent person,

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<sup>506</sup> CD2, Table F, p.188. Also note that just 16 of the 112 slaves manumitted in Demerara/Essequibo were self-purchased.

<sup>507</sup> CB3, 14 November 1826.



and could no longer rely on the owner for food and shelter. For a slave to take on manumission, the provision of sustenance and occupation after the act had to be considered. For slaves who had been bequeathed their freedom, such provisions were often included in the package. For those who had 'married' their freedom, then the new spouse would have looked after their future needs. For the others, however, who had been forced to pay the owners for their freedom, the prospect of freedom had to be carefully judged. Ensuring one had adequate means of support, and a place to live, would have had to precede manumission, because freedom, as Kenneth Brown has said, "did not pay the rent or buy the food".<sup>508</sup> Rodway believed that many such manumitted slaves "hardly did any work, but were a burden to the community, often living upon their slave relations, and when sick had to be looked after by the Board of Poor's Fund".<sup>509</sup> How galling it would have been to be free and yet have to rely on enslaved relatives for sustenance and shelter.

Understanding why so few slaves achieved manumission, then, is not so hard after all. By the time the new laws had simplified the process of manumission the prospects of emancipation had markedly improved, so that spending so much money on buying something that would possibly soon be free, may also have affected slave decisions about manumission in the late 1820's and early 1830's. Generally, manumission in Berbice had only a limited impact on the behaviour of the majority of the slave population. Most of those manumitted lived in New Amsterdam, and among these slaves it is certain to have had some importance and influence on their

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<sup>508</sup> Kenneth Brown, "Material culture & community structure: the slave and tenant community at Levi Jordan's plantation, 1848-1892", in Larry E. Hudson Jr., (ed.), *Working towards freedom: slave society and domestic economy in the American South*, New York 1994, p.95.

<sup>509</sup> Rodway, *History of British Guiana*. v2, p.298.

behaviour as suggested in the historiography. Among slave communities on plantations, however, the impact of manumission was marginal.

## Suicide

It is hard to know what prompted Joe's descent into despair. We know little about the pathology of his depression. Unlike the circumstances detailed in the cases reviewed later in this section, the circumstances of Joe's condition were perhaps too ordinary, and Joe too unassuming, to warrant any detailed investigation. We only know of Joe through four brief entries made by the manager P. McConchie in the punishment record book of plantation Best Coffee Land:

[7 January 1827, 20 lashes]: For having a cutlass in his hand & threatening to kill his wife

[23 April 1827, 12 lashes]: For being intoxicated & not able to do his duty & insolent to the overseer

[17 May 1827, 10 lashes]: For proposing to dispose of his yearly allowance blanket

[4 June 1827, bedstocks one night]: For attempting to hang himself<sup>510</sup>

Can we read into this quadruplet some meaningful narrative of depression? Had a psychologist been on hand at the time, Joe's threat to kill his wife with a cutlass would have been cause for some concern as to Joe's mental state. And later, Joe's use of drink during working hours to the extent that it rendered him incapable, might also have indicated another step down the ladder of psychological decline. And our psychologist would no doubt have read into Joe's attempt to rid himself of his

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<sup>510</sup> PB1, Best Coffee Land.

possessions sure evidence of clinical depression. Finally, Joe ended the speculation and attempted to hang himself. No psychologist was present, however, and only the manager was on hand to report on Joe's condition. Interestingly, trailing Joe's descent, there was a concomitant descent in the severity of the punishments given to Joe by the manager, perhaps reflecting a glimmer of recognition of Joe's pathological decline. Unfortunately the records end in July, and no further mention of Joe was made.

Though it is clear that Joe was depressed, and that his depression had taken about five months to mature, it is not clear whether it had anything to do with slavery. Suicide was a way out of slavery, and one of the most drastic methods available, but it was also a way out of life, and whether it was a life of slavery or just life itself which was being abandoned in the suicide cases of Berbice is not easy to determine. We know that it was an option that a number of slaves took, and perhaps many more at least contemplated it at some point in their lives. But suicide among slaves significantly challenges interpretation. Issues of resistance, fatalism, oppression, self worth, emasculation, and many others, could be seen to increase the incidence of suicide among slaves. Among any population there are many circumstances which might provoke suicidal behaviour – ranging from clinical depression to the impulsive response to momentary grief. Slaves in Berbice could be expected to engage in the full range of suicidal pathology common to many societies, but it is questionable whether they might also be expected to have some additional motivation for self destruction due to their enslavement.

There were 18 cases of suicide in the three years from 1819 to 1822,<sup>511</sup> from a total population of around 23,000, an annual rate of about 26 for every 100,000 of population. This period is too small, and the numbers too low, however, to make them very useful for any comparative analysis. The figures for Grenada (which in 1817-1819 indicate rates of 11 per 100,000) and for Tobago (which in 1819-1821 show a similar rate of 13 per 100,000) suffer from the same deficiency.<sup>512</sup> More comprehensive were figures calculated from the 1850 United States census by David Lester which indicated suicide rates among slaves at just 0.72 per 100,000, while freed slaves had a rate of 1.15, and free whites had a rate of 2.37. These figures suggest that, at least in the United States, the freer you were, the more likely you were to commit suicide. Lester also notes, however, that these figures may have been artificially low with some critics arguing that “many suicidal deaths go unrecorded, and this may have been even more likely in 1850”.<sup>513</sup> This would be a good argument in a Christian country where relatives would have been keen to disguise the shameful and sinful act, but it is more likely to have effected the figures for affluent whites than for poor black slaves. No reliable comparisons can be made with the figures from Berbice, and the figures from the United States show a negative correlation between slavery and suicide.

Modern rates for suicide in the United States indicate that African-Americans have lower suicide rates than whites, with figures of 12.3 and 2.3 per 100,000 for African-American men and women respectively, and 21.4 and 4.6 for white men and women respectively. Lester's article stresses ethnic predisposition, but such

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<sup>511</sup> Higman, *Slave populations*, Table S8.13.

<sup>512</sup> Ibid., compiled from Tables S9.36, S9.37, S1.10, S1.11.

<sup>513</sup> David Lester, “Suicidal behaviour in African-American slaves”, *Omega*, v37(1), pp.9-10.

predisposition is problematic.<sup>514</sup> Cultural traditions would seem to have more influence than any ethnic influences, which always suggest an element of racial predisposition. Additional to the successful and unsuccessful attempts at suicide, there was also a class of behaviour which at times indicated suicidal tendencies among the slave population in Berbice. Behaviour such as self abuse, self mutilation, self endangerment, and refusing medical treatment could all represent a pathology of suicidal tendency, though other explanations can also apply. There were 7 offences punished which could possibly be interpreted as evidence of suicidal tendency in the period covered. However, this figure includes acts of self mutilation designed to avoid work, so we can arrive at no clear estimation of suicidal behaviour from this data.

Explaining suicide and suicidal behaviour against a backdrop of such statistical information is consequently problematic. To create some link between suicide and slavery it must be shown that the overall effect of slavery was to increase its probability. But clearly, in the United States, the opposite seems to have been the case and the figures available for Berbice contain such a low overall number (6 per year), the possibility that the figure was aberrant and non-representative is high.

Suicide, like the practice of Obeah, murder, and rebellion, attracted considerably more official attention than most other plantation-based offences. Of course once the suicide had been committed there was little for the officials to do except record the fact. There was no one to punish, and no one left to file a complaint. Nevertheless, the record is quite rich in recording cases of unsuccessful attempted suicide, and these cases became the subject of considerable legal formality, though both cases

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<sup>514</sup> Ibid, p.4.

reviewed below involved ‘crimes’ associated with the attempted suicide. One case involved the prosecution of the woman Yabba and the man La Rose. Yabba and La Rose were wife and brother respectively of the hospital nurse Lambert who had attempted suicide. In consequence of Lambert’s attempt the two defendants had physically assaulted Andrew McWatt whom they had blamed for Lambert’s action. The case was prosecuted in the Court of Criminal Justice and comprised some 60 pages of manuscript documents (though much of it related to the formalities of Court procedure). Another case, which may also have involved a suicide, centred around the slave Christiaan, one of his wives, and their two children. The case was also prosecuted in the Court of Criminal Justice, and produced 35 pages of manuscript.

Lambert worked as a hospital nurse at the Winkel Department, and he had attempted suicide following a punishment given him by the manager Andrew McWatt. James Mathew, an agent of the Winkel department, admitted that Lambert “had threatened to kill himself” before being put in the stocks, but he “was not alarmed as he had on former occasions made the same threat”, and that he “did not think he wd. put it into execution”.<sup>515</sup> In modern parlance Lambert was a known suicide risk, albeit one of the ‘attention seeking’ variety. In his testimony Lambert provided evidence of a perceived injustice regarding his punishment. The cause of his punishment was not in dispute: Lambert had failed to open the hospital at the proper time.

On Saturday evening after we went to Mr McWatt’s for Rum ‘twas 1/2 past 7. I came over here and locked the Hospital ... I went to Mr McWatt at 1/2 past 9, there were Gentleman there and Mr John Walker was there also and some Coloured Ladies and I did not wish to interrupt them so I went away and went ... to my Sisters who had a

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<sup>515</sup> CJ1, pp.135-136.

Dance. In the morning about 1/2 past 7 I sent a messenger to the Head man Lewis, but he did not receive it. Lewis heard that the people wanted to open the Hospital Door and he went and got the key from Mr McWatt. ... not long after Mr McWatt sent Daniel to call me ... I then came here to the woman's apartment and met Mr McWatt and Mr Walker in the Room. Mr McWatt said, You Sir where have you been that you did not come and open the Hospital Door? I said, I sent a messenger to Lewis to beg him to open the Hospital for me, he said what business has Lewis to open the Hospital for you? I said as Lewis is a head man I begged him to open the Door for me. Mr McWatt said you Damned infernal Rascal I will have your arse well cut tomorrow for you. I said Sir as it is Whitsunday I beg your pardon I wont do the like again I said so twice over<sup>516</sup>

Lambert emphasized that he had been responsible and doing his job properly, and that he had taken reasonable steps to have the hospital opened on time by delegating a "head man" to do it for him. McWatt and John Walker, another official at the Winkel Department, testified that Lambert had been drunk and as a consequence had failed to open the door. They also stated that when asked why he had not come to work on time Lambert had replied in "very abusive language", and that this had induced McWatt to order Lambert into the stocks. All agree that before going to the stocks Lambert had gone to the physic room and stolen a phial of "corrosive sublimate" and secreted it in his clothes.<sup>517</sup> Thus Lambert had made the decision to commit, or attempt to commit, suicide before he was put in the stocks. The Fiscal asked Lambert, "What was your reason for taking it?" To which Lambert had simply replied, "Through vexation at being put into the Stocks".<sup>518</sup>

The physical assault by Lambert's brother and wife on the manager McWatt indicates that both thought that McWatt had provoked Lambert's attempted suicide. We have seen in previous chapters that slaves continually protested unjust punishment. The frustration over the injustice of Lambert's punishment could be

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<sup>516</sup> CJ1, pp.137-139.

<sup>517</sup> CJ1, pp.127-129.

<sup>518</sup> CJ1, p.140.

attributable to slavery, but the irrational passions of a man under the influence of rum could not. Moreover, had Lambert been free, and employed as a nurse for wages, he could not have expected to escape punishment for a perceived dereliction of his duty. Whatever the punishment might have been in that case (dismissal, a fine or even a flogging had he been an apprentice) it could just as easily have provoked a similar response from him.

As discussed in Chapter Four, a first reading of the case of Christiaan and his wife Jannetje could be interpreted as evidence of a slavery-induced suicide, involving as it did family separation. As the case unfolded, however, we shall see that the links between slavery, family separation and suicide are at best tenuous in this instance. Christiaan was charged by the Fiscal with the murder of Jannetje's daughter Kaatje,<sup>519</sup> and with conspiring with and aiding "his Wife Jannetje to drown themselves and their children".<sup>520</sup> Christiaan related that after their sale, Mr. Knecht had nailed up the doors and windows of Christiaan's house, but that his wife and her brother had broken into it again. Christiaan said that he told his wife this was wrong and told her to leave. Later he was told to get ready to go to town in the boat and so he went to get his jacket from his wife. Christiaan related what happened then:

I found her sitting near the water side at the old ferry. I asked her for my jacket and not getting an answer from her I took it saying master is waiting for me to go in the boat and was about to leave her when she said she was going to drown herself and her children. I returned to her and found she had a bottle of rum which was nearly out. I suppose the children must have drunk some of it. ... I said who will you leave to mind the children she said she was going to carry them with her ... She then plunged in the River with the two children. I followed to

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<sup>519</sup> Also referred to as Christiaan's 'adopted daughter', (CJ2, p.422).

<sup>520</sup> CJ2, pp.422-423.



endeavour to save them, but was frightened and alarmed that I could render no assistance.<sup>521</sup>

In Christiaan's account he had only tried to prevent the suicide. He deposed that he did not touch either of the children, yet claimed not to be able to "give an account how they [Jannetje and one of the children] were drowned". Another slave nearby, Isaac, testified that he had tried to rescue them but had been struck by Christiaan, though Christiaan had claimed only to have done so because Isaac would not let go of Christiaan as he was getting out of the water.

The testimony of Jannetje's son Lambert, who survived the attempted murder, however, tells a very different story. He claimed that his parents had met in the plantain walk and together tried to drown them.

Christiaan blindfolded Kaatje, my mother blindfolded me. I was led by my mother into the River where she endeavoured to drown me by pushing me under the water. I cried out and I heard my sister cry also, in the act of struggling the handkerchief came off my eyes. I saw Christiaan with Kaatje in deep water and Christiaan strike her on the face after which Kaatje sunk and was not seen again. Christiaan then made towards me. I made a noise and Isaac came to my assistance, Christiaan stabbed Isaac in the head with a Knife – Mon Rose then came and with Isaac took me out of the River, I went on the bank, and when there, saw my Mother swimming further out in the river, and Christiaan pursuing her – Christiaan came up to her and tried to force my mother under the water, but not succeeding he struck her in the face. My Mother sunk and rose twice and third time sunk and rose no more.<sup>522</sup>

Evidence was also given by Isaac, who corroborated Lambert's account from the time he came to the river and "found Christiaan in the river with girl Kaatje blindfolded endeavouring to drown her by striking her and pushing her under the water". After Isaac had tried to intervene Christiaan had struck him in the head and his eyes had become so full of blood that he could see nothing more.

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<sup>521</sup> Ibid., pp.443-442.

<sup>522</sup> Ibid., pp.427-428.

Depending on which testimony you believe, either Christiaan was a monster, or a saviour. Either way it was clear that Christiaan had not intended suicide. In Christiaan's version he had had no part in the suicide. In Lambert's version Christiaan had only tried to kill the children and Jannetje, for if he had intended to commit suicide himself he had plenty of opportunity to do so, but did not. Both versions, however, indicate a severe depression on the part of Christiaan's wife, and it seems that she had, at least initially, intended to kill herself. The fact that she had tried to swim away from Christiaan indicates that she may have changed her mind once in the water. She had perhaps suddenly realised that Christiaan had no intention of committing suicide but had just wanted to get rid of his family.

Speculating on the cause of Jannetje's suicide or murder is complicated by two competing sets of circumstances which may have occasioned her depression. First, there are those hinted at by Christiaan: his wife's fear of separation from her husband (though not her children), and the loss of their communal home. Second, the report by the Fiscal which indicated that Christiaan had two other wives, and that Christiaan wanted to bring these with him also, along with their brothers. Now Christiaan's other two wives, and their brothers, belonged to Mr. Knecht, Christiaan's new owner. Luthers had agreed to buy Christiaan but did not want a further 5 slaves. The Fiscal suggested that he approach Mr. Knecht with the idea of him buying Jannetje and her two children. With such an undertaking on the part of the Fiscal "Christiaan and his family ... appeared perfectly satisfied".<sup>523</sup>

From this distance it is impossible to discern what truly happened. Surprisingly, though the court found "the strongest possible presumption of the Prisoner

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<sup>523</sup> Ibid., pp.417-418.

[Christiaan] being guilty of the said several crimes”, it concluded that the case made by the Fiscal, the boy Lambert and the independent witnesses, did “not appear ... to be sufficient legal proof to convict him thereof”.<sup>524</sup> Nevertheless, our interest lies not so much in Christiaan’s guilt or innocence, but what prompted Jannetje to plan the end of her own life, and the lives of her children. In one sense Jannetje was suffering from the affects of family separation and the loss of her home, both in ways peculiar to slavery. Ironically, however, it is possible that Jannetje only had that home with Christiaan because of slavery. Had Christiaan and Jannetje been free, it is just as possible that Christiaan would have abandoned Jannetje much earlier for his other wives. Nevertheless, the home that slavery created was now being destroyed by it, and Jannetje had to worry not only about the separation from her husband, but a separation compounded by the fact that he would now be living with his other wives, who had till then been at least geographically remote. While Christiaan belonged to the same owner as Jannetje, and the other wives to a different owner (as was the case before their sale) she had the satisfaction of the lion’s share of Christiaan’s attention, and their shared house. Under the new arrangement she was doubly disadvantaged: not only was Christiaan going to a new owner and leaving his shared house with Jannetje, but his new owner also owned his two other wives and so Christiaan could be expected to establish a shared house with his new ‘family’.

Neither explanation suggests that slavery would have altered the emotional tangle a great deal. It certainly influenced the circumstances of the actors’ lives, but perhaps not the outcomes. As with the case of Lambert the sick nurse, though slavery was a factor, the characters and their private circumstances could easily have

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<sup>524</sup> Ibid., pp.423-424.

engineered a similar tragedy in its absence. Lester's figures suggest, if anything, that slavery disinclined slaves towards suicide and it would be interesting to speculate on what elements of slavery could induce such disinclination. We saw in the case of Jannetje that she had possibly retained her house and family through the agency of slavery, which prevented husbands and (less commonly) wives from simply leaving homes and family responsibilities in ways that would have been possible had they been free. Suicide has also been linked with feelings of self hatred, whereby individuals blame themselves for their position. Within slavery, it would be easier for despondent individuals to blame slavery rather themselves for their situation and hence be less inclined to punish themselves. Whatever links slavery had with suicide in Berbice, however, none of the cases suggest that it was used as means to escape slavery per se, and with the figures so low it can realistically be discounted as a method that slaves in the colony chose to avoid bondage.

### **Going bush**

The evidence that slaves were easily able to leave their work and their homes and go into the bush, and thus escape the reach of the colonial administrators, is overwhelming. Even to classify the behaviour of these slaves as 'escapes' is misleading. There were no gates, no guards, no complex security systems to overcome – all the individuals needed to do was pick up their belongings and leave. Going to the bush was the most obvious, the most common, and by far the easiest way for slaves to remove themselves from slavery in Berbice. It did not require years of planning and privation as did manumission, was certainly less dangerous

than suicide, and did not require the co-ordination required for a successful revolution. It could be done, and was done, literally on the spur of the moment, and the choice was one that a slave could make almost at any time. That this clear option existed in Berbice, and that few slaves took this option, needs careful and considerate attention.

That slaves were reluctant to escape was not unique to Berbice. Figures taken from the United States indicate that slaves there were even more reticent to escape.

TABLE 6.2:  
SLAVE ABSCONDING IN THE USA.<sup>525</sup>

<i>Region</i>	<i>Number per year</i>	<i>Total slave population</i>	<i>Percent per year</i>
New York Region 1771 to 1805	35	25,000	0.14%
Virginia 1736 to 1801	19.7	188,000 (1770)	0.01%
South Carolina 1732 to 1782	69.8	57,000 (1760)	0.12%
North Carolina 1775 to 1840	42	168,824 (1810)	0.02%

The figures in Table 6.2 were collated from newspaper advertisements of runaway slaves. The figures for North Carolina are taken from Freddie L. Parker's book *Running for Freedom*, and he suggests, illustrate that "slaves in North Carolina fought to secure psychological and physical freedom from the horrors of slavery". While the slaves in North Carolina may well have sought psychological and physical freedom very few sought that freedom by running away – barely 1 in 4,000 slaves attempted such escape each year. If Parker's book tells us anything, it is that running away was aberrant behaviour for slaves. Though the information provided in the

<sup>525</sup> Figures for New York, Virginia and South Carolina taken from Shane White, Philip Morgan, Gerald Mullin, in Shane White, *Somewhat more independent: the end of slavery in New York City, 1770 to 1810*, Athens Georgia 1991, pp. 140 – 141. Figures for North Carolina from Freddie L. Parker, *Running for freedom: slave runaways in North Carolina 1775-1840*, New York 1993, pp. 9, 18-21, 191-195.

details of the slaves who absconded is useful to provide some insight into the small number of slaves who escaped, it is not particularly useful to understand slave behaviour in general. These studies would be more useful had they included some valid correlations between such circumstances as family separation, which would need to include figures for slave family separation among the general population. Thus if 3 percent of the general population of slaves were separated from their family, and 2 percent of the general population ran away in order to reunite themselves with separated family members, then it would be valid to argue that a majority of slaves found separation intolerable, and were prepared to escape to reunite themselves. This kind of correlation has not appeared in the literature so far. With such low figures of runaway slaves, the odds were that most slaves in the United States were never materially involved in such activity, and so it cannot be assumed that those who ran away did so as representatives of their entire society. The challenge for the historian is to explain the stayers, more so than the movers.

For slaves to contemplate escape they needed a destination – somewhere they could escape to. They also needed to have a reasonable chance of reaching that destination without detection. In the USA, the presence of so many whites spread across the slaveholding states and the often great distances which separated the escapee from freedom considerably shortened the odds of success. Thus it is reasonable to assume that, even among slaves willing to escape, the difficulty of making it to a suitable safe haven significantly reduced the numbers of escape attempts. In Jamaica, too, running away was problematic. First there were few suitable escape destinations. Cultivated plantations were spread across the country, and although Maroon communities were established, from the mid eighteenth

century these had been formalised by treaties with the authorities and often acted as de facto bounty hunters returning runaway slaves to their estates in exchange for produce. Neither of these situations, however, existed in Berbice. The area around Berbice was vast, and though some formalisation of relations between the Dutch authorities and certain maroon communities had occurred in neighbouring Dutch Guiana, these communities were confined to well known areas, easy enough for a runaway slave to avoid. Sometimes Indian ‘bucks’ were used to track runaways, but this was very rare, and no successful examples have been found. Any concerted group of slaves would have had no difficulty finding space to establish a free society, or to join established ‘friendly’ bush communities already known to the slaves on the plantations. The ease with which slaves in Berbice could leave their plantations without permission can be graphically illustrated by the figures provided in Table 6.3. These figures have been compiled from the complaints of slaves made in the years 1824 and 1825 to determine whether the slaves who came to town to complain had left their estates with permission, or had done so after escaping, or whilst already absent without leave from their plantation.

TABLE 6.3:  
COMPLAINANTS ESCAPING TO COMPLAIN 1824 – 1825.<sup>526</sup>

	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Number of Complainants in Period	231	100%
Complainants having escaped	194	84%
Complainants requesting passes	8	3%
Insufficient information to determine	29	13%

<sup>526</sup> The years 1824 and 1825 are used because they are more detailed and often mention the circumstances by which a slave came to complain (CB2).

As can be seen from the table, the vast majority of slaves making a complaint to the Fiscal (84 percent) did so by either leaving without permission or whilst already absent without permission from the plantation. Slaves frequently and freely admitted having “made their escape to complain”, and though the slaves were often cautioned to request passes, they did not heed these requests and the officials did little but extend their disapproval.<sup>527</sup> Slaves escaping to complain often utilised the resources of the estate, as when Abraham, Klein Hendrick, Groot Hendrick, and Philander, on plantation Vrouw Johanna, stole the only coriaal to come to the Fiscal, thereby trapping the proprietor on the estate.<sup>528</sup> The fact that slaves, with escape already in their grasp, should use their brief freedom to visit a high official of the enslaving nation, rather than one of the maroon communities surrounding the colony, seriously undermines the notion that slaves remained slaves largely as a consequence of physical constraint. Slaves escaping in Berbice had little fear of recapture should they have chosen to remain in the bush.

Absconding behaviour unrelated to making complaints to the Fiscal can be found in the punishment records and Table 6.4 lists offences related to absconding.

TABLE 6.4:  
ABSCONDING BEHAVIOUR NOV 1826 TO JULY 1827.<sup>529</sup>

	<i>Number involved</i>	<i>Percentage of punishments</i>
Encouraging others to abscond, harbouring runaways	11	0.2%
Absconding, extended absence	76	1.1%
Out without a pass	112	1.6%

<sup>527</sup> CB1, 23 October 1821.

<sup>528</sup> CB2, 5 March 1825.

<sup>529</sup> PB1.



Most slaves punished in these cases had no intention of permanent escape.

Harbouring runaways most usually referred to allowing Bush Negroes to reside in slave houses, and those slaves punished for being out without a pass were those who left the plantation at night to visit friends or family, and had not even missed a days work. Those punished for extended absence were often slaves who, after some time away, had voluntarily returned to the estate or who had 'run away' to other plantations where they had friends. An example of the latter was Castlereagh who had run away on 11 April and was caught staying on Mr. White's premises whence he was taken to the barracks until his owner Edmund Bond paid £12 to have him released.<sup>530</sup> In this period there were few if any cases of a slave having escaped into the bush and being returned from there to the colony as a result of official or managerial action. Figures for those who made a successful escape from plantations cannot, of course, be had from either the punishment records or the complaint records, both of which deal with slaves who remained within the plantation system. We do occasionally learn of runaway slaves incidentally from these records, as with the case involving plantation Herstelling reviewed in Chapter Two whereby three slaves from the group of strikers chose to remain in the bush rather than return with their 37 comrades to the estate.

Perhaps the only possible way to have some idea of the numbers of slaves who had successfully escaped in Berbice would be to calculate the figure from the raw data of population statistics. Using the data available from slave registrations, we can find the following in Table 6.5.

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<sup>530</sup> PB1, Bond CG 14 April 1827.

TABLE 6.5:  
CALCULATED ESTIMATE OF SUCCESSFUL ESCAPES BERBICE 1819 TO 1822.<sup>531</sup>

	<i>Figures for 1919</i>	<i>Figures for 1822</i>
Registered population	23,768	22,356
Deficit 1822		1,412
Registered Deaths 1819 to 1822		2,236
Manumissions 1819 to 1822		18
Total leaving slavery 1819 to 1822		2,254
Registered Births 1819 to 1822		1,664
Net Imports from other colonies		5 <sup>532</sup>
Total entering slavery 1819 to 1822		1,659
Natural deficit (Total out minus total in)		595
Actual deficit (from figure above)		1,412
'Missing slaves'		817

Not all the 'missing' slaves could be explained by escape. Higman points out that “a significant underregistration of births occurred”.<sup>533</sup> Many of these, however, were largely due to “children born and dying within a registration period”,<sup>534</sup> and are therefore unlikely to affect figures used to calculate missing slaves. So we can say that of the 817 missing slaves, a large percentage were slaves who had escaped. This equates to around 270 slaves per year, or an annual rate of 1.2%, at least ten times the rate recorded in the USA in Table 6.2. Though this still leaves the vast majority of Berbice slaves remaining on their estates, it does illustrate that a significant number of slaves made the choice of escape and that there is no evidence that the authorities made any significant attempts to retrieve these slaves. Escaped slaves only came to the recorded attention of the authorities when they returned to the

<sup>531</sup> Higman, *Slave populations*, Tables S1.1, S8.1, S10.1

<sup>532</sup> Figures not available for 1819 to 1822, figures for 1830 show just 5 slaves, for later periods a net emigration. It would safe to assume that figures for 1822 would have negligible impact on the outcome of the calculation (Higman, *Slave populations*, Table S1.20).

<sup>533</sup> Ibid, p.26.

<sup>534</sup> Ibid, p.33.

colony, but no mention was made of slaves who escaped permanently. This surely suggests that slave owners did not fear such activity. This is supported by some evidence reviewed later whereby some managers and slave owners actually challenged slaves to escape if they did not like the regime on a particular estate. The most probable explanation for such colonial unconcern about runaways is that slave owners and the colonial authorities knew that life in the bush was not sufficiently attractive to lure most slaves from their established communities. Bush negroes were seen as a nuisance by estate managers because they were frequently involved in crimes such as theft, and were seen as a possible source of infectious diseases such as leprosy. But there is no evidence that managers thought that the bush negroes who frequented the cultivated areas of Berbice were likely to lure away working slaves.

Many slaves had frequent contact with bush negroes and most slaves were familiar with their way of life. Rodney and his daughter on plantation Best Coffee Land, for example, were punished for “allowing a strange negro to harbour in their house”;<sup>535</sup> and Eliza on Herstelling was punished for “being privy to the bush negroes being in the habit of visiting the negroes & not giving information”; and Frank was punished for “providing the bush negro Bob with a cutlass belonging to this estate”; the familiarity extended even to the manager, who knew the names of some of the bush negroes.<sup>536</sup> The information slaves had about bush life would have been constantly updated, not just from the many bush negroes who inhabited the surrounding regions, but also from runaway slaves who ‘went bush’ only to return some time later. For example, Fanny on plantation New Forest ran away to the bush

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<sup>535</sup> PB1, Best Coffee Land, 15 January 1827.

<sup>536</sup> PB1, Herstelling, 28 December 1826.

for three days before coming back to the plantation.<sup>537</sup> The case of William, a carpenter belonging to L. F. Gallez, is interesting in that he was locked up in the Barracks for two weeks because “he refused to go with Mr. Gallez’s people to Canje Bush”. After William was released, he was directed by the Gallez’s town agent, G. Schwartz, to go up the Canje, but instead “ran away ... into the bush for two weeks”. His experience of bush life led him to reconsider, and we can be forgiven for doubting his stated explanation for his return, when he claimed that “it would be very hard for any person to lose his money that way” and so he “thought proper to come back”. Such expressed concern for his owner’s financial investment in himself was no doubt designed to curry favour with the Protector of Slaves in pressing his case against Gallez of insufficient food allowance. The case highlights not just the ease of escape into the bush but perhaps also the difficulty of remaining there.

Some escapes were committed with comical ease by slaves even whilst under close observation by management. Take the following account by the driver Andries on plantation Beerenstein for example:

Sunday morning he broke the stocks to go to the negro houses to get something to eat; that in the mean time the manager came into the hospital, locked the same, and complainant, on his return, went in through the window. ... Asked ... who unlatched the staple of the socks, replied, he himself ... staple fastened again, and the complainant was put in the stocks with both feet. Monday night complainant broke the staple off again, hid himself till Thursday morning, took a coriall from the estate, and came down here this morning early.<sup>538</sup>

Similarly, Jacob on plantation Maria and Agnes came and went at will, despite the concerted attempts by management to constrain him:

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<sup>537</sup> PB1, New Forest, 3 April 1827.

<sup>538</sup> CB1, 15 June 1821.

[Jacob] therefore ran away. The next morning he went to the place of work as usual. On breaking off work the driver attempted to catch him, to put him in the stocks, but he escaped; the same thing occurred again on Saturday.<sup>539</sup>

The advantages and disadvantages of going to the bush would have been carefully considered by slaves. Many slaves spent a few days in the bush before making up their minds, taking time out from the provocative situation that had induced them to leave in the first place. The decisions the slaves made at this point depended on a variety of factors relating to the individual's circumstances and personality. These would have included considerations about relative freedoms, cultural expression, material well-being, security, kinship, family, self esteem, and future prospects. The first and most unequivocal advantage of escaping to the bush was that it meant an end to the person's enslavement by the colonial oligarchy, and an end to plantation labour. Almost from the moment a slave left the estate for the bush, he or she immediately left slavery. 'Slave' was a label, not a physical attribute, and there was no way of taking it with you if you did not want to. If freedom was equivalent to non-slavery, then the moment escapees entered the bush they gained a kind of freedom. This freedom, however, may well have been at the expense of some other 'freedoms' such as that enjoyed by slaves to live among their kin. Moreover, going bush, especially into the realm of a bush negro community, did not equal total freedom. At best, it swapped one set of constraints for another, even if the new set was sometimes judged more favourable. There was no compulsion to join established bush settlements (and it is possible some settlements would not have universally welcomed new entrants), but the alternative was an expanse of jungle that stretched all the way to the Amazon, and though it teemed with life, not much of it

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<sup>539</sup> CB3, 27 August 1827.

was human. Unless a large body of slaves was involved (as in the case of Herstelling) the chances of an escapee existing independent from either an established bush settlement or the slave system was low. The options for most slaves contemplating escape, therefore, were to either stay put or join another ordered society.

Bush societies may have been more egalitarian than slave societies, but there no doubt remained a considerable array of rules and constraints. And though they were less restrictive than slave society, that did not preclude the existence of the occasional despot. The prospect of merely exchanging a white overlord for a bush-negro one may have given many slaves pause for thought as they weighed up the pros and cons of escape. Not much is known about the bush negroes of Berbice, but more information is available about the Maroons in neighbouring Dutch Guiana or Surinam, and there was little that would have separated the groups. Even in the larger and better established communities we find rulers such as Atokwa of the Ndyuka maroons, who “jealously guarded his overripe bananas and would not shrink from killing trespassers in his fields”,<sup>540</sup> or the medicine man Menisaki who would unleash his assistants on disfavoured peoples and “destroy their crops”.<sup>541</sup> There were also bands of robbers such as those led by Amawi and Nelo who “terrorized the Paramakas”.<sup>542</sup>

Whatever the actual conditions that bush negroes had to live under, it is clear from the Fiscal's documents that many slaves held escape as a very unattractive

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<sup>540</sup> H. U. E. Thoden van Velzen, “Dangerous ancestors: ambivalent visions of eighteenth and nineteenth century leaders of the eastern maroons of Surinam”, in Stephan Palmié (ed.), *Slave cultures and cultures of slavery*, Knoxville 1995, p.137.

<sup>541</sup> Ibid, p.133.

<sup>542</sup> Ibid, p.128.

option. Many equated going bush with suicide or death, and managers often challenged slaves to escape, secure perhaps in the knowledge that slaves did not find the prospect of bush life appealing. For example, Swift on plantation Welgelegen complained that the manager was always telling him, “You may go and hang yourself”, “drown yourself”, or “live in the bush” – statements which Swift claimed, “hurts me too much”.<sup>543</sup> Similarly, Edward and Frederick on plantation Dankbaarheid complained that “the manager said we could run away in the bush, or go to complain, it was all one to him”. Peter on plantation Maria & Agnes complained that the driver was often saying “that he does not care whether the people hang or drown themselves, or whether they run away in the bush”.<sup>544</sup> Quarry, speaking for 22 timber cutters who brought a complaint against L. F. Gallez, complained that the overseer Parry was trying to flog them into running away:

Says he will flog us till we run away in the bush this we cannot do therefore we come to complain.<sup>545</sup>

For Jim, belonging to F. Klaassu, committing suicide was an option he had contemplated rather than remain with his master, but he had not seriously considered the option of going bush. In other words, for Jim, suicide was preferable to going bush.

I do not want to belong to him; he must sell me. If I go back, he will punish me; and if he does, I will hang myself. I don't want to go in the bush. I am not lazy; but he must sell me.<sup>546</sup>

Other slaves characterised those slaves who ran away as inferior or bad.

Socially, bush negroes were not held in high esteem by the slaves of Berbice. Take

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<sup>543</sup> CB1, 10 November 1823.

<sup>544</sup> CB1, 29 August 1820.

<sup>545</sup> CB2, 21 September 1824.

<sup>546</sup> CB1, 17 November 1823.

for example Jem and Davy from plantation Profit who “come to town, to make the complaint to his Honor the Fiscal for redress, for they do not wish to go into the bush like bad negroes”.<sup>547</sup> When the large group of slaves from Herstelling went on strike and left the plantation for several days, they obviously discussed among themselves the pros and cons of going one step further and leaving slavery altogether. Such a large group of mixed sex slaves may well even have been able to establish an independent settlement, especially as they had taken all their clothes, tools and other belongings. In his testimony, Burke, one of the drivers, clearly indicated that the slaves had discussed remaining in the bush:

I told the people we were not bush people, we were to make huts to cook but to keep near the back dam and endeavour to get a punt [to come to town to complain].<sup>548</sup>

Of course slaves were hardly likely to praise bush negroes to officials of the colony, and it might be argued that slaves who portrayed runaways as 'bad' were doing so to ingratiate themselves with the Fiscal. But if this was a tactic that had any potency more slaves would have employed it, and remember it was the slave who came to the Fiscal with this information, and by coming to the Fiscal the slave had already, in a sense, rejected the option of escape. A more likely explanation is that slaves characterised runaways as 'bad' because they felt the need to explain to the Fiscal why they had *not* escaped into the bush if they were that unhappy. There was no logical reason for slaves to volunteer such negative information. Moreover it is difficult to reconcile the ability of slaves to insult and disrespect officials and

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<sup>547</sup> CB1, 6 August 1822.

<sup>548</sup> CB2, 14 April 1825



managers on the one hand, yet feel the need to ingratiate themselves by an unnecessary and irrelevant commentary on bush negroes on the other.

Sometimes the conditions individuals found themselves in left them little alternative. Harry, a slave from Demerara hired to plantation No.49 related the desperate circumstances some slaves encountered:

Some of the negroes, from the bad treatment of the manager, have run away. One of Mr. Chapman's negroes was flogged so often and had so bad a foot, that he was obliged to run away in the bush; if he is dead or alive we do not know; he was one of the firemen, and walked on his hands and feet;<sup>549</sup>

Presumably, the slave crawled into the bush, and one certainly wonders how he would have survived in the jungle. The important feature, however, was that it took some extreme behaviour to induce the man to take the step of permanent escape. In much the same way Louis who worked for Mrs. Sanders believed that her cruelty must surely drive the slaves to go to the bush:

[W]ishes to be sold than remain with such a cruel mistress, as certainly all the negroes one day or other, after so much suffering, will run away in the bush.<sup>550</sup>

Such testimony highlights the decisions slaves had to make in relation to escape: the relative degrees of hardship between life on the plantation and life in the bush. Only considerably unattractive conditions on an estate could induce most slaves to take the alternative of life in the bush. It also emphasises one of the roles the Fiscal had for slaves such as Louis or Harry: the last opportunity to ameliorate their condition and make slavery acceptable before deciding to go into the bush.

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<sup>549</sup> CB1, 20 September 1823.

<sup>550</sup> CB1, 18 August 1820.

There would have been some very practical reasons why slaves did not see escape to the bush as an attractive option, not the least of which was the possible separation from family and kin. Kin networks had been carefully established, and were very important to a person's identity, self-esteem and sense of belonging. Slavery was a hardship, but it was one that was shared by most of the people anyone knew or cared for. To escape was to risk isolation and alienation from one's kin and family. Even for a young person, with few ties, there would have been the future to consider. Whatever the hardships of slavery, it did offer relative stability and certainty. And there was the inevitable comparison between the rudimentary equipment of the bush communities and the sophistication of Western technology, such as fine material for clothing, modern cooking implements, cutlasses etc.. Though much Western technology was not available to the slaves, they could see and imagine its future application. There was too a kind of legitimacy to life in mainstream Berbice society, an infrastructure of order and process that bush communities may have lacked. Being 'legally' unfree may often have been preferable to being 'illegally' free. In Berbice going bush was generally the only destination available for someone committed to escape. The nearest non-slave societies were far and difficult to get to, especially without a boat. Despite the rare examples of slaves escaping great distances, such as Tom on plantation East Lothian (who, after "running away and being absent 3 months in Barbados", returned to his work on the estate and his inevitable punishment by the manager)<sup>551</sup> it would have been practically impossible for most slaves to get further than the various bush communities around Berbice. Thus, unlike slaves in the United States who had the

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<sup>551</sup> PB1, East Lothian, 1 March 1827.

option of escape to a 'free' north, and a legitimate freedom in an ordered society, the slaves of Berbice could only hope to escape to a rudimentary existence in the bush, and as we have seen, not many chose that existence.

### **The realities of revolution and rebellion**

Slaves in Berbice were such an overwhelming majority of the population, and had such easy access to cutlasses and even guns, that the outcome of any universal rebellion would not have been in doubt. It would be interesting to speculate on the response from Britain. Quite possibly the government would have sent the military to retake the colony, but if all the slaves stuck to the rebellion, it would have required a considerable force and it would have had no certainty of success. The experience of French attempts to retake Saint Domingue, and the Dutch to retake Berbice discussed later, illustrate the difficulty of putting down a committed revolution. It is doubtful much help would have come from neighbouring British colonies for fear of the revolution spreading if they weakened the forces in those colonies. In short, a committed revolutionary effort by a majority of slaves in Berbice had every chance of success had that effort been made. The fact of the matter is, however, that no such effort was made, and the reason that it was not made needs to be addressed coolly and rationally.

During the period of this study, one notable example of rebellion took place in neighbouring Demerara in 1823. The excellent account of the rebellion by Emilia Viotti da Costa in her book *Crowns of Glory, Tears of Blood*, provides an interesting commentary on slave uprisings. The Demerara rebellion, however, was not so much

an attempt to overthrow British slavery in that colony, but to overthrow a slave system which they believed had been illegally perpetuated. The small number of slaves involved in the Demerara uprising believed that a law of emancipation had been passed in the British parliament, and that the local oligarchy had refused to act upon it. Ironically, then, the slaves were attempting to uphold British law, not to break it.<sup>552</sup>

There had been several slave uprisings in Berbice in the Dutch period but the most recent and important one had taken place in 1763. This uprising deserved the name 'revolution' because the slaves who decided to join the rebels intended to establish a free society of former slaves. After the initiating spark, the revolt spread quickly and in a short time the rebels, numbering about 1,000, roughly one fourth of the slave population, had taken most of the colony and forced the whites and 'loyal'<sup>553</sup> slaves onto a few plantations, a crumbling fort, and some ships moored in the river.<sup>554</sup> On 2 April 1863 the two rebel leaders, Coffy and Akkara, sent a note to the fort outlining their demands:

Coffy, Governor of the Negroes of Berbice and Captain Akkara send their greetings to your late Honourable. We don't want war; we see clearly that you do want war. ... The Governor of Berbice [Coffy] asks Your Honour that Your Honour will come and speak with him; don't be afraid! But if you won't come, we will fight as long as one Christian remains in Berbice. The Governor will give Your Honour half of Berbice, and all the negroes will go high up the river, but don't think they will remain slaves. Those negroes that you Honour has on the ships, they can remain slaves.<sup>555</sup>

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<sup>552</sup> See Da Costa, *Crowns of glory*.

<sup>553</sup> Loyalty from slaves was the common interpretation by masters of slave decisions to stay with them rather than revolt. Such decisions by slaves were not likely to have been motivated by a concern for the interests of the owner, but rather a concern for the long term interests of themselves and their families.

<sup>554</sup> Population figures for 1762 were "346 whites, 244 Indian slaves, and 3,833 negro slaves, making a total of 4,423" (Rodway, *History of British Guiana*, vol.1, p.173).

<sup>555</sup> Rodway, *History of British Guiana*, vol.1, pp.192-193.

Clearly the rebels wanted a legitimate freedom sanctioned by the Dutch authorities. Moreover, they did not see their conflict as a challenge to the institution of slavery in general, just as it applied themselves. Those slaves who had, in their minds, chosen slavery with the Dutch over freedom with the rebels, were 'free' to make that choice. Furthermore, the rebels stated that they would go "high up the river", meaning that they would leave undisturbed the cultivated region containing all the plantations. In this way the rebels resembled maroons in both Surinam and Jamaica who opted for legitimised association with European powers in exchange for their independence.

The small number of whites in the colony ruled out any assault on this large band of rebels, and with Colonial support months away in Holland, it was some time before the Dutch were able to regain the colony. But even before the force sent from Holland to quell the revolt had been sent, there were problems among the rebels. There had been some serious infighting and deadly leadership struggles, along with a shortage of food. A great many of the rebels quit the gang and returned to the Dutch held areas. By the time the main force of Dutch soldiers arrived, months later, there was little to do but root out the few remaining rebel strongholds in the bush. It took time, not so much because of the strength of resistance, but because of the labourious lines of communication and reinforcement. Whatever the lessons those who had been involved with the rebellion had learned, they included the fact that unless a rebellion can appeal to a majority of slaves, then revolution did not represent a successful means of attaining legitimate and acceptable freedom. In the words of Emilia Viotti da Costa "rebellion was risky and its lessons [for slaves]

ambiguous".<sup>556</sup> In the 1763 rebellion, a minority of slaves were involved, and most of those who were involved had begun to defect even before the Dutch were in a position to retake the area lost. Whatever information the survivors passed down to succeeding generations, it contained nothing which encouraged anyone to repeat their attempt.<sup>557</sup>

Rebellions were dangerous for slaves in ways other than the obvious threat of retaliation and retribution from the colonial government. To attempt revolution necessarily involved the upheaval of a stable social system. Having formed various kinship bonds, satisfied the normal desires of sustenance, shelter, recreation, procreation, and having acquired valued possessions and started a family, it would have been a considerable risk for slaves to throw this society into doubt by revolutionary action. The lives of most slaves were perhaps not sufficiently bad, relative to the life of a free person, to warrant action by slaves to overthrow slavery just to achieve some kind of freedom. The choice was there – it just was not sufficiently attractive. Compounding the difficulty was the lack of a cohesive slave resistance. As discussed previously this was perhaps partly the fault of slave communal and kinship structures, which saw those slaves not belonging to a particular group as 'outsiders'.

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<sup>556</sup> Da Costa, *Crowns of glory*, p.80.

<sup>557</sup> Ironically, some of the 'uprisings' in Berbice in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century did not involve slaves. In 1751 sixteen soldiers tried to "escape from the fort" (though one would have thought they were not there under duress), and were later captured and "cast into a loathsome prison overrun with snakes and rats" and later "the principal culprit was ... ordered to be shot", while the rest were flogged and banished to other colonies (Dalton, *The history of British Guiana*, pp.194-195). Again, in 1803, another revolt occurred amongst British soldiers when "bad food, sickness, and unsuitable accommodation were the cause of the revolt" (Rodway, *History of British Guiana*, v2, p.266.). Slaves were not the only ones prepared to protest when dissatisfied with their conditions, and it would be interesting to know what the slaves observing these white rebellions thought of the affairs.

It is beyond the scope of this thesis to explore all slave rebellions, but we do know that only the one in Saint Domingue was ever successful, and even then it could be argued that the elite slave-owning coloured population objecting to racial discrimination in France were as much responsible for its success as were the slaves.<sup>558</sup> The explanation for the failure of slave revolutions, especially in societies where a majority of the population were slaves, must rest with decisions that the slaves themselves made.

## Close

In Berbice it was certainly possible for slaves to find a life outside slavery. What is debatable, however, was the value that the slaves themselves placed on that life. Suicide cannot be considered a serious option for slaves to end their enslavement, and in any case its relationship with slavery is tenuous at best. Modern suicide seems to be as closely associated with affluence and cultural predisposition as it is with oppression and degradation. The numbers of manumissions in Berbice tell us that this, like suicide, was not a realistic option for slaves either. Manumission has been argued by Orlando Patterson (and others) to have supported the slave system. Patterson believes that manumission not only “reinforced the master-slave relationship”, but also that few slave owners “ever lost in the process of ... manumission”. Furthermore, manumission provided a powerful incentive for slaves

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<sup>558</sup> A good account of the revolution in Saint Domingue can be found in Carolyn Fick, *The making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue revolution from below*, Knoxville 1990.

to comply with the slave system.<sup>559</sup> But as discussed above, this hypothesis probably only applied to a minority of slaves in Berbice. While manumission may have offered slave owners another point of leverage over some of their slaves, this would only have applied to the most compliant slaves, who would have had to commit to a high level of co-operation from an early time. Most slaves would have known this, and hence have known the limited application of manumission and the unlikelihood of their ever achieving it. Manumission was not like a lottery, with every player equally likely or unlikely to win. Only a few players were given any chance at all, and for the vast majority of slaves it was hardly worth thinking about, let alone worth any extra effort.

Escape, on the other hand, was an option which was reasonably easy to take – both because there were no physical obstacles to running away, and because the conditions of life in the bush were widely known. But, as indicated above, few slaves took that option. The explanation for this is complex and no single causal factor could be forwarded to explain it. Central to understanding the slaves' attitude to going bush would be an appreciation of how slaves valued certain aspects of their life within slavery and within a broader New World society. In Chapter Eight some features of materialism will be reviewed, and the possible appeal it had for the inhabitants of Berbice. While all slaves abhorred being slaves, they did not perhaps see their long term prospects enhanced by illegitimate and marginal freedom. Furthermore, life in the bush was more than likely to have been simply too hard and physically onerous for most slaves to consider it as a viable alternative to their lives as slaves. We have few details of nutrition, mortality and natural increase for the

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<sup>559</sup> Patterson, *Slavery and social death*, p. 341.



members of the various bush communities, but the evidence suggests that these people frequented the plantations and needed to steal and trade in stolen goods to get food – a good indication that many bush communities were unable to support their members nutritionally. We also have evidence that bush people were sometimes leprous and this would also have given slaves pause for concern about joining such communities. To account for the low numbers of slaves who committed themselves to a life outside slavery in the bush, the historian would have to consider both the unattractiveness of life in the bush and the appeal of the lives slaves had structured within their established society. The balance between the two must be carefully considered, for the more unattractive slavery is made to seem the more difficult it is to explain why more slaves did not find life in the bush more appealing. Each time an aspect of slavery is negatively exaggerated, there is an unwitting negative exaggeration of life in the bush.

For very similar reasons, revolution also had limited appeal to most slaves. Revolution involved a degree of social expense and upheaval which was simply too great for the possible rewards that those involved may have gained even in the event of success, and the existing bush communities may have served as a model of life had a revolution achieved its goals. Furthermore, successful revolution would have required a degree of co-operation and co-ordination from slaves that would have been difficult to achieve unless the conditions of slavery were so bad that a majority of slaves agreed that revolution was worth the risk. In Chapter Five we saw how slaves had constructed cohesive local communities and that these distinct communities possibly hindered more widespread co-ordination by slaves to resist slavery.

So, having assessed the expense of manumission, the dangers and difficulties of revolution, the hardship of bush life, and the futility of suicide, slaves had but one rational course to take in Berbice – to put their efforts into ameliorating the conditions of slavery and plantation labour. It is almost certain that, by the period covered by this study, slaves would have had a notion that the forces of abolition in Britain were mustering year by year, and that the chances of eventual emancipation were steadily growing. The implication of this was that a future outside of slavery was perhaps best achieved through patience. Making that choice easier was the knowledge that their lives, while not as good as they wished, were for the most part at least tolerable, and not much worse perhaps than the lives of many in the world at that time.

## Chapter 7: Punishment and coercion

### Introduction

When the manager of plantation De Kinderen, Charles McLean, punished Agamemnon for stealing “sundry articles out of Mr. Forsyth’s house” he made the comment that the punishment of “twenty five lashes” was for a crime for which Agamemnon “would be hanged in England”.<sup>560</sup> McLean was at least partially correct: theft was indeed a capital offence in Britain at that time, and one which was difficult to defend,<sup>561</sup> but while a great many thieves were hung, many more were transported as convicts to Australia. Nevertheless the point was made; in McLean’s mind, slaves had it easy. McLean, an employed manager, probably knew only too well how confined life could be in England at that time, and how unforgiving it was for those who found it necessary to break the law to survive. While McLean would have enjoyed the prestige of his position in Berbice, he would also have been well aware of his lack of prestige in the wider context, and the precarious nature of his employment and future prospects. Perhaps McLean even resented the slaves over whom he had nominal charge. While slaves suffered many kinds of privations and restrictions, they did enjoy a kind of immunity from many situations free persons of Europe could not easily escape. Slaves, when choosing to remain in the system,

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<sup>560</sup> PB1, De Kinderen 27 March 1827.

<sup>561</sup> J. L. and Barbara Hammond noted that, in Britain, “until 1836 a man accused of a felony was not allowed to employ counsel to make his defence” (J. L. Hammond and Barbara Hammond, *The village labourer 1760 – 1832, a study in the government of England before the Reform Bill*, London 1913, p. 201).

would have formed an idea of their relative condition and their relative place in the world that they knew or had heard about. In some ways the lives of slaves were very similar to the lives of poor persons elsewhere in the world at that time – exposed to exploitation by a wealthy elite, and coerced by onerous alternatives into a life of limited appeal and opportunity.

There are many aspects of life for which a comparative examination of slavery could be made: housing, nutrition, health, cultural expression, legal rights, personal liberty and others. Much work has been done by some historians in comparing the measurable aspects of slave health, and these in turn have led to detailed estimations of the material well being of slaves. The work of Richard Steckel and Robert Fogel, for example, at the very least indicates that slaves were not materially much worse off than other poor people of the New World, or the Old.<sup>562</sup> Less well documented is the comparative extent and degree of physical coercion. Although this chapter will deal principally with use of corporal punishment as a means of coercion, it is important to remember that physical coercion was not limited to this most dramatic expression of coercion. We saw in the last chapter that slaves had a viable alternative to slavery, but that alternative, a rudimentary existence in the bush, was simply too onerous. This kind of coercion would be very familiar to the masses of industrialised labour in Europe at this time. Mill workers in England were certainly “free” to leave their jobs and pursue a life outside of mill work, but the mill owned your home, so that leaving a job meant leaving home as well. For a few that meant a new, perhaps better, job or self employment and the ability to rent a new house. For

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<sup>562</sup> A chart in Robert Fogel’s *Without consent or contract* indicates that slaves in neighbouring Surinam had a higher average meat consumption than ordinary people in Germany, France, Netherlands, or Italy, and consumed only slightly less than people in Britain, (Fogel, *Without consent or contract*, Figure 21, p.133).

most the choices were bleak: at best moving to live with relatives and existing on family support, at worst it meant homelessness, starvation, the workhouse, family separation and communal dislocation – in effect social ostracism.<sup>563</sup> Through ‘freedom of contract’, life as a mill worker was made to seem less miserable, even if remaining within the mill town meant compliance with an employer's demands, where even efforts of amelioration had to be carefully structured to avoid arbitrary dismissal and where collective disputes risked a forceful response involving “military force and draconian laws”.<sup>564</sup> Similarly, the unsatisfactory nature of bush life made slavery more palatable to the slaves in Berbice. Like the mill workers, however, this did not mean that they liked their situation. Remaining within slavery meant general compliance with the slave system, and where efforts of amelioration had to be carefully structured to avoid corporal punishment from managers or colonial officials.

Corporal punishment in Britain during the early nineteenth century remained an important means of coercion, but was increasingly concentrated among certain members of British society – slaves, convicts, soldiers, sailors and indentured servants. It remained legally permissible for husbands to beat wives, parents their children and teachers their pupils – but these were legal only up to a point, and in any extreme or violent way were not supported by social or customary rights. Anyone who had sought to flog a pupil or a wife in the same manner as a slave or a sailor would have found themselves in considerable trouble. Nevertheless, force remained the backstay of all laws, and transgression had overwhelming consequences for most

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<sup>563</sup> Perhaps reminiscent of tribal practices in some societies such as the Australian Aborigine's pointing of the bone to identify someone deemed socially non-existent.

<sup>564</sup> Anthony Brundage, *The English poor laws, 1700 to 1930*, Basingstoke 2002, p.44.

of the population. Execution could result from any one of some 200 offences in Britain at this time.<sup>565</sup> Emilia Viotti da Costa illustrated how the abolitionist movement, as exemplified by the writers of the *Christian Observer*, did not just exaggerate the horrors of slavery, but exaggerated the beneficence of the life of a British worker:

The article spoke of British workers and labourers – many of whom had risen in different parts of the country against poverty and oppression – as a privileged group of people, protected by the courts and by the laws. But it was silent about the arbitrariness they had suffered. And the persecution. And the gag laws. And the Home Office prohibition of workers' combinations and secret meetings. And the harassments endured by radical leaders. And the many workers who had been arrested, tried, and sentenced to be transported or hanged.<sup>566</sup>

We saw in the previous chapter how a remarkably substantial case of murder brought against Christiaan was dismissed – it is easy to imagine that had Christiaan been British and had the court been in London, the outcome would have been very different for Christiaan. In Berbice, slave owners were limited in the practical range of punishments they could bring to bear on their slaves. Although slaves could be hanged, it was rare for a very obvious reason: the loss of valuable property by the slave owner. Even whipping had to be done with some regard to the future health and working capacity of the slave.<sup>567</sup> Confinement too was restricted by work considerations, and was thus overwhelmingly limited by managers to nightly confinement. Furthermore, slave codes restricted the degree and extent of physical punishment permitted. In Britain a worker hanged or imprisoned or maimed as a consequence of corporal punishment was no great loss to an employer – there were

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<sup>565</sup> J. B. Hirst, *Convict society and its enemies: a history of early New South Wales*, p.9.

<sup>566</sup> Da Costa, *Crowns of glory*, p.283.

<sup>567</sup> Between 1819 and 1822 only two slaves were hanged and one slave died as the result of a whipping (Higman, *Slave populations*, Table S8.13).

plenty more workers available. In Berbice the consequence of the loss of a slave was rather more serious. It not only represented a material loss of asset, but required an expensive replacement from a pool of labour which was diminishing year by year. This is not to say that slaves and British workers were equally debased, only that an absence of slavery did not guarantee an end to exploitation or misery.

Central to Orlando Patterson's idea of slavery is the use of physical coercion. Physical coercion was seen as essential to sustain slavery. Indeed, according to Patterson's thesis, "slavery is always a relationship that rests ultimately on force" and thus "it is hardly surprising that in every slave society the master has the power to inflict corporal punishment".<sup>568</sup> This power certainly existed in Berbice, though the master's power was more usually delegated to managers, overseers and drivers. But as discussed above, power that ultimately rested on force was hardly unique to slavery. Patterson speaks of differences of degree and kind, but as will be shown, within the context of certain members of British society, neither the degree or the kind of physical coercion used in Berbice was unusual for the period. Patterson's explanation of corporal punishment is that it served to reinforce the power of the master over the slave and hence served to perpetuate the slave system. But if slaves had an alternative to slavery, such as life in the bush, then excessive use of physical punishment was just as capable of driving slaves away from slavery, and thus undermining the slave system, as much as it could reinforce compliance within the system. Furthermore, it would be the dramatic representation of the use of the whip which significantly affected the British public's perceptions of slavery, and hence slavery's political palatability in the British Parliament. While corporal punishment

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<sup>568</sup> Patterson, *Slavery and social death*, p. 190.

was undoubtedly utilised to sustain a system of behavioural control, in Berbice it was unlikely to have extended much beyond the slave owners' desires to get a certain level of productivity from their slaves. In most cases of corporal punishment examined in Berbice, this was precisely how both slaves and managers understood the use of such punishment. As seen in Chapter Two, most punishments given were used by managers to negotiate certain work standards by slaves.

Robert Olwell in *Masters, slaves, and subjects* says that “the day to day operation of the law served to reinforce and re-enact social hierarchies”, but it certain that he does not mean to suggest that this was somehow peculiar to the institution of slavery.<sup>569</sup> The plethora of acts which affected the British underclasses of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was in every way designed to do exactly the same thing. Moreover, the laws regarding slaves in Berbice, while ultimately supporting the legality of slave ownership and the system of slave control, also sought to protect slaves from the excesses of masters. Nevertheless, slaves were routinely punished as of right by their owners, without recourse to the legal processes of the courts. Slaves were most often punished for transgressions which did not fall under any particular law of the land: as was found in Chapter Two most slaves were punished for work related failures such as low productivity, laziness and neglect of duty.<sup>570</sup>

It is misleading to represent elements of slavery which were common to most of underclass society at the time in a way that makes them seem as if they were peculiar to slavery. It is important, therefore, to understand which parts of slavery

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<sup>569</sup> Robert Olwell, *Masters, slaves, and subjects: the culture of power in the South Carolina Low Country 1740-1790*, Ithaca 1998, p. 100.

<sup>570</sup> See Table 2.4 in Chapter Two.



distinguished slavery from other common forms of labour control. Physical coercion has often been represented as typifying slavery, but as the following will hopefully demonstrate, in the case of Berbice, that view has been overstated.

### **Punishments in perspective**

Punishments in Berbice could be brutal and inhuman. There are numerous cases of excessive, unjust, and sadistic punishments levelled against slaves. The missionary John Wray referred a boy, estimated at 11 or 12 years of age, to the Deputy Protector of Slaves. The lad stated pitifully:

I have had this chain on me more than a week. It is not taken off at night. It hurts my leg. I was flogged this morning by Mr. Sherburne with a leather whip, after I had returned from the market. The chain was on me whilst he flogged me.<sup>571</sup>

The boy was sent to the Fiscal who noted "it was the second case for these many years<sup>572</sup> of a negro being worked in chains at the caprice of an individual". The Fiscal consequently instituted a prosecution against Mr. Sherburne. Another case, brought by Peter, Arthur, Charles, Joe, and Dick, on plantations No.5 & No.7<sup>573</sup> against the manager Roderick Nicolson, involved treatment the Protector described as "little short of absolute torture".<sup>574</sup> In yet another case, Quassie brought a complaint against J. F. Linde (owner and manager of plantation Vrouw Johanna and himself a coloured man) because he was "tied up and received 160 lashes", the Fiscal

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<sup>571</sup> CB3, 17 July 1827.

<sup>572</sup> The Fiscal, Mr. Bennett, had held the post for 13 years at this time.

<sup>573</sup> Owned by James Blair M.P. of London, (PB1).

<sup>574</sup> CB3, Letter Charles Bird to H. Beard, 1 September 1827, p.247.

confirming “his back exhibiting full proof of a severe flogging”.<sup>575</sup> Another man, Scipio, on plantation Bloomfield, was flogged so that “his private parts, which he exhibits, is so severely wounded by the whip he can scarcely sit or stand”, the Fiscal noting that the “negro appears much emaciated.”<sup>576</sup> Then there was the case of Bob, the driver on plantation Culcarin, who was purported to be “in the habit of taking powdered glass and marabunters (wasps), and mixing them together, and then rubbing his whip with the mixture” before he gave a flogging to his victim.<sup>577</sup>

The cases above illustrate not that slave punishment was brutal, but that it could be so. Many of the above complaints resulted in prosecution, or were proved false. Either way, some severe physical punishments were officially and socially unacceptable. Punishments at this time in history were very often corporal. It is a time when the British penal system was still in its infancy, and corporal or capital punishment was commonplace, a period when, as J. B. Hirst comments, “[p]unishment was directed at the prisoner’s body – to kill or maim it, or to ship it out of the country”, which at this time was to Australia.<sup>578</sup> Though slaves in Berbice would have had little knowledge of the life of an Australian convict, the two colonies were administered by the same ultimate authority (the British government) and were very closely contemporaneous, with slavery ending somewhat earlier than did transportation as a convict. During the period of this study managers and owners were limited by law to 39 lashes until 1826 when the limit was lowered to 25,<sup>579</sup> except when ordered by a court or the Fiscal. In New South Wales, however, the

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<sup>575</sup> CB1, 31 July 1821.

<sup>576</sup> CB1, 2 July 1822.

<sup>577</sup> CB1, 12 August 1822.

<sup>578</sup> Hirst, *Convict society and its enemies*, p9.

<sup>579</sup> The limit of 39 lashes was set by an ordinance of the Court of Criminal Justice of Berbice on 14 February 1810, the limit lowered to 25 after the slave amelioration act of 1826.

standard punishments in the early years, when “sentences of several hundred lashes were common”, were later restricted when the “the new maximum became in practice a hundred lashes, with fifty being the number most commonly given”.<sup>580</sup> Convicts were punished for much the same offences as were slaves, all to do with “the need to discipline forced labour”, and including “absconding, absenting, neglect of work, disobedience, insolence, drunkenness and disorderly conduct”.<sup>581</sup> Even as late as 1835 (after slavery had ended in Berbice) there were still some 7,103 floggings a year distributed among the 27,340 convicts (including female convicts who were not flogged at this time),<sup>582</sup> a rate among male convicts approximately equal to one flogging for every 2.54 convicts.<sup>583</sup> In Berbice in 1827 the rate was one flogging for every 7.11 male slaves.<sup>584</sup> In this respect, at least, slaves seemed much better off than Australian convicts, with little more than a third the expectation of a flogging and, when flogged, the expectation of receiving fewer lashes. Of course being a slave was not equivalent to being a convict. A convict at the end of the sentence was automatically free, and because convicts belonged to the same racial group as the masters, once they were free the scope for re-integration into the wider society was greater and acceptance much more easily achieved. And while former convicts or their progeny could disown any convict ancestry, the same could not be said for slaves in the New World.

The lower ranks of British society were the most obvious counterparts to slaves in the free European world. In Britain, systems of coercion increasingly relied on the

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<sup>580</sup> Hirst, *Convict society and its enemies*, p.111.

<sup>581</sup> *Ibid.*, p.58.

<sup>582</sup> *Ibid.*, p.58.

<sup>583</sup> This assumes that two thirds of the convicts in New South Wales were male.

<sup>584</sup> There were 774 whippings in the first six months of 1827, equivalent to 1,548 whippings in a year distributed among the 11,000 male slaves.

fear by working people of the loss of their employment. Elite society only had to resort to corporal punishment, such as death, imprisonment or transportation, on those unconvinced by such coercion. There remained, however, certain groups of British people who were not so easily coerced in this way. This group included soldiers and sailors. Greg Denning has studied the shipboard conditions for British ships entering the Pacific Ocean during the late eighteenth century. Though his figures relate to an earlier period, they provide some basis for comparison with the slaves of Berbice. The 1,556 men included in Denning's analysis yield some interesting statistical information for the punishment regimes typical of the British navy in that era. The punishments were recorded for voyages and these voyages were of different lengths, so accurate comparisons are difficult. Nevertheless, it showed that 47 percent of the marines on board were flogged, and 25 percent of able seamen. This compared to around 7 percent for male slaves in Berbice over an eight month period.<sup>585</sup> To extrapolate this figure for longer time periods is complicated by the fact that many slaves were repeatedly punished, and so that the percentage of slaves punished with the whip increased somewhat over time, but at a decreasing rate until only a fixed percentage of slaves were ever whipped, but in some cases whipped quite regularly. The figures can still, however, give us a good idea of the relative frequency of punishment. One study of American vessels in 1846 to 1847 showed that one in four American sailors were flogged.<sup>586</sup> On British ships, insolence and disobedience were the most common reason for a flogging at 32.7 percent, while 29.4 percent were flogged for not performing their duty. This

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<sup>585</sup> See Table 7.3 below, as well as further discussion of punishment rates.

<sup>586</sup> This figure would either be for the period of twelve months, or for the duration of voyages completed during that time. Either way the punishment rate would be very much higher than that experienced by the slaves of Berbice.

compares to 14.9 percent and 55 percent respectively for slaves in Berbice.<sup>587</sup> The type and severity of the most common punishments on British ships, where the “ordinary means of discipline” was administered with the whip,<sup>588</sup> would have been quite familiar to the inhabitants of Berbice. Some punishments may have been entirely alien to them, but the style would have been familiar, all physical and brutal. There was hanging, ‘running the gauntlet’, confinement, ‘gagging’, confinement in irons, and even something called ‘grampussing’.<sup>589</sup>

Dening noted that punishments meted out to the crews of British registered ships were characterised by an “aloofness” which directed attention away “from the man in power to the power itself”. Moreover punishments should “never be done in anger” and had to be done strictly as the result of an infringement of known laws and regulations.<sup>590</sup> There was nothing personal in the punishment, it was as much a duty of the victim to receive it as it was for the officer to administer it. Time and again in the Berbice records managers report their motivation for inflicting punishment as a matter of duty, where they were ‘under the necessity’ of punishing a slave, not for their own sake, but because they felt that this was the socially responsible thing to do. And it is perhaps not surprising too that slaves most often characterised unjust

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<sup>587</sup> Greg Denning, *Mr. Bligh's bad language: passion, power and theatre on the Bounty*, Cambridge 1992, pp.113-124. Insolence and disobedience are equivalent to a combination of insolence and refusal to work, while not performing their duty has been made up of both neglect of duty and unsatisfactory productivity. See Tables and Charts in Chapter 2 for the detailed reasons for slave punishments.

<sup>588</sup> *Ibid.*, p.117.

<sup>589</sup> Running the gauntlet involved being prodded with a sword down the line of crew with each crew member whipping the subject with ropes, a very severe punishment seen to be second only to hanging. Gagging was a practice whereby a spike was bound across a man's open mouth. Grampussing was a more informal punishment of binding a man's arms in an elevated position and pouring water down him (*Ibid.*, pp.117-118).

<sup>590</sup> *Ibid.*, p.116.

punishments as those which were done without recourse to any legal or customary infringement, and were inflicted at the personal whim of managers and owners.

Fogel and Engerman, in *Time on the Cross*, maintain that the frequency and severity of whippings varied enormously in the American south. From whippings that “resulted in death” to ones “as mildly applied as the corporal punishment normally practiced within families today”.<sup>591</sup> Stephen C. Crawford has used the narrative records of former slaves in the United States to assess the impact of physical coercion in the antebellum South. He found that only about 30% of the slave population could expect a whipping in their lifetime, a low figure compared to Berbice or elsewhere in the Caribbean, and further illustrates that the use of physical punishment in slave societies was less than generally supposed.<sup>592</sup>

Physical punishment is not so fearsome to those who believe that they are unlikely to receive that kind of punishment. I have previously referred to the article by Mary Turner called “The 11 O’clock Flog”. The jaunty title suggests, more so than the substance of the article, that flogging in Berbice was as regular for the slaves as morning tea was for British clerical workers. But Turner does not provide any quantifiable data, and sidesteps direct statements concerning the actual rates of punishment in the colony. She tells us that “delegates from the aptly named sugar estate ‘Plantation Profit’, with its daily 11 o’clock flog of 25 lashes” came to the Fiscal to complain. From the wording of this sentence, and the use of the word “delegate” (signifying an appointed representative group) the casual reader might

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<sup>591</sup> Robert William Fogel and Stanley Engerman, *Time on the cross: the economics of American negro slavery*, Toronto 1974, pp.144-145.

<sup>592</sup> Stephen C. Crawford, “Punishments and rewards”, in Robert William Fogel and Stanley Engerman (eds.), *Without consent or contract: conditions of slave life and the transition to freedom: technical papers volume 2*, pp. 536-550.

interpret this to mean that most of the slaves on Profit were flogged daily at 11 o'clock.<sup>593</sup> It sounds like plantation procedure. But this was hardly likely to have been the case. There were 253 slaves on plantation Profit, and if only a quarter of the slaves were flogged 25 lashes every day, this would have meant that the half dozen drivers on the estate would have had to swing their whips several hundred times each morning. Referring to the punishment record books available we find that plantation Profit recorded just three whippings in the two-month period recorded in 1826, and six whippings recorded in the first six months of 1827.<sup>594</sup> That is not to say that there were not more whippings a few years earlier, even though later figures suggest that the whipping rate for the colony as a whole did not diminish over time, but actually increased.<sup>595</sup> What the figures do indicate is that even on this plantation the majority of the slaves could not have expected any kind of regular flogging.

Mary Turner also reports on the conditions on plantation Prospect. Immediately preceding the report she makes some general statements about slave punishment routines in Berbice:

The 11 o'clock flog was integral to task work; it took place when, after the morning's work was done and the slaves were due their two-hour 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. break, it was found that less than half the task had been completed.<sup>596</sup>

The suggestion is that this was routine practice in Berbice, and that most slaves suffered under the threat of repeated punishment. Though eleven o'clock was the usual time to inflict punishments for any offences committed by slaves, regular flogging was not common practice throughout Berbice, and was not sanctioned by

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<sup>593</sup> Turner, "The 11 o'clock flog", p.45.

<sup>594</sup> By this time the 1826 slave code had banned the whipping of females, so that these figures would have to be expanded to compare with those of 1823 (PB1).

<sup>595</sup> See Table 7.2 later in this chapter.

<sup>596</sup> Turner, "The 11 o'clock flog", p.43.

the authorities, especially for shortfalls in task work as suggested by Turner. An extensive case in 1819 brought by five slaves from plantation Friends illustrates the unacceptability of such punishment regimes either to the slaves or to the authorities. The slaves had complained “that if a sufficient part of this task is not completed, they are each flogged with a carracarra”. The Fiscal examined each of the slaves and asked them who had been punished at eleven o’clock for uncompleted task work:

Noordwyk says he never was; Alexander shows one stroke; on inquiring, it appears it was because he was not early enough in the field; Utrecht not flogged, Alcibiades not flogged, at eleven o’clock, but made to work during breakfast time; Zealand not flogged, but made to dig at trench at night till gun-fire. The negroes appear in a high state of health, and also in excellent condition. Alexander and Zealand bear evident marks of most severe punishment received on plantation Den Arend ... some years ago.<sup>597</sup>

The case illustrates both that routine flogging for uncompleted tasks was not acceptable to the Fiscal, even at this early period, and that such regimes would not pass without protest from the slaves. The complaint action Mary Turner uses to establish her claim of routine punishment for task work shortfalls in Berbice was one concerning plantation Prospect. Her case is worded carefully so as not to enumerate the extent of the punishments:

The women were sparked into action by the 11 o’clock flog. ... At noon the manager, who clearly thought they were under exerting themselves, sent the headman, ... to flog each of the strong (not the weak, or pregnant) women 12 lashes.<sup>598</sup>

But the statement, “to flog each of the strong ... women 12 lashes” does not tell us each of which strong women. The reader could be forgiven for thinking that Turner meant each of the strong women on the estate, rather than each of the strong women who had proffered the complaint. In fact the plaintiffs comprised just seven women,

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<sup>597</sup> CB1, 11 March 1819.

<sup>598</sup> Turner, “The 11 o’clock flog”, p.43.



one of whom was pregnant. The six remaining women were flogged, and it was this flogging that had prompted them to complain. The fact that Prospect had 120 slaves, and that this flogging of just 6 of them was carried out in an extraordinary fashion (by calling the head man), demonstrated not that the slaves were regularly flogged on the plantation, but precisely the opposite: that they were not usually flogged, and that when a small number of them were flogged, they came to complain about it. What is clear, from this and other complaints concerning Prospect, was that the slaves were in dispute with the manager over the amount of work expected. The resistance, the flogging and the complaint actions brought to the Fiscal were all part of the negotiations over work standards and practices. These actions by the plaintiffs, and the floggings by the managers, were not a universal – nor even a usual – feature of slavery in Berbice as Turner suggests.<sup>599</sup>

Mary Turner's article provides some useful commentary on slave systems and their effects on women, but it also illustrates how easy it is to inflame the horrors of slavery. There is no doubt that slavery was a brutal form of labour exploitation and Berbice was no exception.<sup>600</sup> But it was not universally so, and does not need to be made any more brutal than it actually was. The use of subtle exaggeration, judicious omission, and phrasing chosen to achieve a dramatic effect, are tactics unhelpful to the purpose of recovering the lives of slaves in the Americas. The object of studying slavery is not to find out how horrible it could be and then to pass that off as

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<sup>599</sup> CB1, 4 September 1823 and 5 September 1823. It is also interesting to note that in the last two months of 1826 Prospect recorded just 2 punishments, and 14 for the first 6 months of 1827, and that for the eight month period recorded just 7 punishments which involved a whipping, (PB1, Prospect).

<sup>600</sup> The evidence shows that punishment rates in Berbice were higher than those for the neighbouring colony of Demerara. The crude punishment to slave ratio for Demerara indicates a monthly rate of 24 punishments per 1,000 slaves, while the ratio for Berbice calculates at 45 punishments per 1,000 slaves per month, or over 80% more punishments per slave in Berbice than in Demerara, (PB1 and PD1).

representative, but to learn how it actually was for the people involved. Having discussed the onerous alternatives available to the slaves of Berbice, demonising slavery beyond its true application within the colony only makes it difficult to understand why slaves did not more readily accept those unattractive alternatives such as life in the bush.

### Punishments in Berbice

The plantation punishment record books were mandatory for every plantation, and every punishment on every plantation was recorded.<sup>601</sup> The only complete records known to survive, however, cover the period from November 1826 to July 1827. Table 7.1 shows the punishment distribution over the eight month period for which records survive:

TABLE 7.1:  
ALL PUNISHMENTS AND THEIR DISTRIBUTION.<sup>602</sup>

	<i>Nov 26 – Jul 27</i>
Number of punishments	6,975
Number of slaves punished	3,916
Total slaves	19,322
Number of slaves punished as % of all slaves	20%
Punishment rate for slaves (for eight months)	0.2
Years per punishment for 'average' slave in their lifetime	2.5
Number of punishments per slave punished	1.8

<sup>601</sup> With some insignificant possible omissions.

<sup>602</sup> PB1.

This table illustrates that the expectation of punishment was by no means evenly distributed, with just 20% of slaves accounting for 100% of the punishments during the period covered. The average number of punishments per slave who received a punishment was 1.8 which indicates that those punished were often punished more than once and over time this figure would grow. As noted previously a direct extrapolation over time cannot determine how often any one slave might have been punished in his or her lifetime, as a core group of slaves would end up accounting for the vast majority of punishments, but even without this fact these figures indicate that a slave in Berbice could expect to be punished no more than once every 2.5 years. The figures also indicate that a majority of slaves could expect no punishment at all in this time period. Naturally, the corollary also holds, that there would be some slaves who could anticipate regular and severe punishment. An extreme example was Celia on plantation Middelburg's Welvaren, who was punished with "bed stocks during the night" for the same offence of "neglect of duty & unwillingness" 15 days in a row. Moreover, she was the only slave punished during this period.<sup>603</sup>

Over time the proportion of slaves punished would increase, but at an ever decreasing rate. To get some idea of how likely punishment was for the average slave, given enough time, Table 7.2 provides the figures for the two periods which make up the eight month period covered by detailed documentation which, because

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<sup>603</sup> PB1, Middelburg's Welvaren, 25 April 1827 to 9 May 1827.

these records include the slave's name, makes it possible to track which particular slaves were punished in each period.<sup>604</sup>

TABLE 7.2:  
COMPARATIVE PUNISHMENTS FOR 1826 AND 1827.<sup>605</sup>

Number slaves punished 2 months 1826	1282
Number slaves punished 6 months 1827	3155
Number slaves punished all eight months	3916
Number punished 1826 and again 1827	521
% of slaves punished in 1826 who were punished again in 1827	41%
% of all slaves punished 1826	7%
% of all slaves punished 1827	16%
% of all slaves punished 1826/7	20%
Punishments per slave punished 2 months 1826	1.3
Punishments per slave punished 6 months 1827	1.7
Punishments per slave punished 8 months 1826 & 1827	1.8

The rate of change from one period to the next indicates that as time goes on, the number of slaves punished would increase, (from 7 percent to 16 percent to 20 percent) but at a decreasing rate as the rate of punishments per slave also increased (from 1.32 to 1.73 to 1.83). At some point a more or less fixed percentage of slaves would receive all the punishments. The recurring nature of punishment for some slaves is highlighted in the fact that some 41 percent of slaves punished in 1826 were again punished in the following period of 1827.

<sup>604</sup> It was usual for each plantation to identify each individual, so that if there were two 'Bills' then some other identifier would be added, such as 'Bill 2', 'Bill the ostler', 'Bill senior', 'Bill the boy' and so on. Some inaccuracy must creep in of course, but this would more than be balanced by the haphazard spelling of some names by different clerks, so that Mariantje for one clerk could be spelled Marintje by another. This level of inaccuracy would not be sufficient, over such a large number of records, to significantly affect conclusions drawn from the data.

<sup>605</sup> PB1.

The expectation of receiving a punishment by the whip had been, by 1826, tempered by the abolition of whipping for female slaves.<sup>606</sup> Table 7.3 indicates the distribution of whippings among male slaves for the periods covered:

TABLE 7.3:  
WHIPPINGS OF MALE SLAVES.<sup>607</sup>

	<i>Nov 26 – Jul 27</i>
Number of whippings	1036
Number of slaves whipped	818
Total male slaves (approx)	11000
Total male punishments	4152
Whippings as % of male punishments	25%
Number whipped as % of male slaves	7%
Years per whipping for an 'average' slave	6.72

Table 7.3 tells us that 25 percent of male slave punishments in Berbice involved a flogging.<sup>608</sup> As with the general punishment figures, the period after which an 'average' slave might expect to be whipped is distorted by the fact that many slaves would never have been whipped, but in any case an individual male slave in Berbice could not expect to be flogged any more than once every 6.72 years (80 months). This can be compared with figures from the diary of Bennet Barrow in the American south of 1840, which reveals that on one plantation slaves could expect a whipping once every 17 months.<sup>609</sup>

<sup>606</sup> There were one or two exceptions, usually at the request of a slave girl's parents.

<sup>607</sup> PB1.

<sup>608</sup> Interestingly, though Demerara recorded far fewer punishments in proportion to the slave population, male slaves there had a much higher chance of a flogging. Figures from Demerara and Essequibo show that out of 5,666 male slave punishments, 5,354 involved a flogging, this from a total male population of 33,450 (PD1, p.28).

<sup>609</sup> Fogel and Engerman, *Time on the cross*, p.145. This is for a single plantation which was described as severe. A similarly severe plantation in Berbice is easy to find, there were several which achieved this high rate of punishment, though not with the whip.

With all the above figures, allowances should be made for children and old people, who would have been punished much less, or at least less formally. Favoured slaves might also expect more lenient treatment, though documents reveal that these too were occasionally punished. Even so, it is clear that slaves were not in a constant state of punishment, and that most slaves did not live in terror of the “11 o’clock flog”. What the documents do reveal is that certain slaves were punished quite regularly, and that a minority of slaves incurred the vast majority of the punishments, just as today when a small minority of the population commits the vast majority of offences which come to the attention of the police.

The distribution of punishments is further complicated by the fact that different plantations recorded very different rates of punishment. While the 132 slaves living and working on plantation Balthayock received no punishments for the periods covered by the records in 1826 and 1827, the 37 slaves on plantation Den Arend received a total of 78 punishments during the same periods. Table 7.4 indicates the distribution of punishments at different plantations classified by their punishment rate:

TABLE 7.4:  
PUNISHMENT DISTRIBUTION BETWEEN PLANATIONS (1826-1827).<sup>610</sup>

<i>Punishment regime</i>	<i>Number of slaves</i>	<i>Number of slaves punished</i>	<i>Slaves expectation of punishment</i>	<i>Number of punishments</i>	<i>Punishments per slave punished</i>
Low	7667	818	10%	1198	1.46
Medium	6942	1422	20%	2263	1.59
High	4713	1568	33%	3676	2.34

<sup>610</sup> PB1, November 1826 to June 1827.

A slave's expectation of punishment in column four in the above table corresponds to the maximum likelihood of an 'average' slave on a particular plantation to receive a punishment during the period covered by the records for 1826 and 1827. From the table we find that the largest group, accounting for nearly forty percent of all slaves, lived on plantations with low punishment rates (no more than ten percent punishment expectation), and fully three quarters of slaves lived on plantations with low to medium punishment regimes. Moreover, on those plantations, those who did receive some punishment were punished less frequently.

There also seems to have been a correlation between plantation size and punishment rates. The larger the plantation the less likelihood there was for a slave to be punished. Table 7.5 illustrates the correlation between plantation size and the punishment regimes on the plantation:

TABLE 7.5:  
PLANTATIONS SIZE AND PUNISHMENT REGIMES (1826-1827).<sup>611</sup>

<i>Plantation Size</i>	<i>Number of slaves</i>	<i>Number of slaves punished</i>	<i>Slave expectation of punishment</i>	<i>Number of punishments</i>	<i>Punishments per slave punished</i>
More than 200	9667	1748	18%	2868	1.64
100 to 200	7079	1422	20%	2783	1.96
Less than 100	2576	638	25%	1486	2.33

The difference in punishment regimes between plantations with less than 100 slaves and plantations with more than 200 is reasonably significant (18% - 25%), indicating that the larger the plantation a slave was on, the less likelihood there was of being punished, and of those who were punished, of being punished more than once. The general explanation for higher slave satisfaction on large plantations is that on these

<sup>611</sup> PB1, November 1826 to June 1827.

plantations the slaves enjoyed a greater degree of autonomy, and that management relied more heavily on self-regulating behaviour. The situation was probably a little more complex than that because the influence of a large body of slaves would have affected managers and overseers, encouraging empathy and co-operation to achieve mutually satisfactory outcomes of work negotiations. This was not universal, however, for there still remained certain large plantations with high punishment and complaint rates, indicating a confrontational approach to plantation organization by management and slaves.<sup>612</sup>

Another source of influence on larger plantations may have been the ownership characteristics of a plantation. Larger plantations were more generally owned offshore by absentee landlords. Table 7.6 indicates the average slaves per plantation on locally owned and foreign owned plantations as well as the average punishment rates for those plantations:

TABLE 7.6:  
PUNISHMENTS 1826 & 1827: ABSENTEE VS LOCAL LANDLORDS.<sup>613</sup>

<i>Ownership characteristics</i>	<i>Average number of slaves per workplace</i>	<i>Slaves' expectation of punishment</i>	<i>Punishments per slave punished</i>
Plantations owned by absentee landlords	180	17%	1.6
Plantations owned by local landlords	91	20%	2

The differences here are similar to the differences expected from plantation size. But both the expectation of an individual slave to be punished, and the average number of

<sup>612</sup> For example, plantation Providence or plantation Vryheid recorded about 6 times as many punishments as did plantation No.17 & 18 or plantation No.19 & 20 in the 8 month period November 1826 to June 1827.

<sup>613</sup> Assembled from registered owners according to PB1, with further evidence from CB1,2,3. Only plantations where the residence of the owner could be established has been used, accounting for 64% of plantation slaves.



punishments per slave punished are lower for the average number of slaves per plantation than for those recorded for such plantations in the previous table. It is reasonable to suppose that an absentee landlord had less concern over the social operations of a plantation than would a local owner, and so would have emphasised profitable and trouble free enterprises. Local attorneys and managers would have been sensitive to these requirements and operated the enterprises accordingly. But the manager, with little to report to the owners beyond the financial status of the estate, could have had free reign in the management style of the plantation, so long as this did not affect profitability or create problems with the slaves or the officials of the colony. The largest landlord in the colony was James Blair who was a member of parliament in Britain, and the punishment regimes on his plantations were well below the average, as was the number of punishments per slave punished.<sup>614</sup> Local owners, however, would have had a greater stake-hold in the social organisation of the colony and thus felt the need to oversee not just the work habits of the slaves, but their social habits as well.

The type of workplace has been commonly thought to influence the likelihood of punishment to a certain degree, but the figures from Berbice indicate that this effect was not dramatic. In Table 7.7 information on the plantations with known crop types has been collated:

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<sup>614</sup> James Blair owned 1,595 slaves on 6 plantations and 1 carpenter gang. Punishment expectation by an average slave on Blair's property was 14% for the eight month period, and punishments per slave punished were 1.4 (PB1).

TABLE 7.7:  
CROP TYPE AND PUNISHMENT REGIMES (1826-1827).<sup>615</sup>

<i>Plantation Type</i>	<i>Number of slaves</i>	<i>Number of slaves punished</i>	<i>Slave expectation of punishment</i>	<i>Number of punishments</i>	<i>Punishments per slave punished</i>
Cotton Plantations	3640	683	18.8%	1762	2.58
Coffee Plantations	7207	1555	21.5%	2907	1.87
Sugar Plantations	4996	990	19.8%	1565	1.58
Task Gangs	289	70	24.2%	146	2.09

Interestingly, sugar plantations fared better overall than either coffee or cotton plantations, with low punishment expectation and the lowest number of punishments per slave punished. Cotton plantations had the lowest percentage of slaves punished, but those who were punished got the highest number of punishments for the period. Slaves in task gangs are often thought as being in the worst situation, and in Berbice they had the highest expectation of punishment and a high number of punishments per slave punished.

It would be reasonable to think that local practices would effect the way plantations in a particular district were managed. Communication between plantations was conducted at the local level, and managers and slaves could come to accept regimes peculiar to their area. Table 7.8 has amalgamated nearby districts into five regions, or 'communication clusters', of the colony to see if any differences emerge between districts:

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<sup>615</sup> PB1, November 1826 to June 1827.

TABLE 7.8:  
DISTRICT AND PUNISHMENT REGIMES (1826-1827).<sup>616</sup>

<i>District</i>	<i>Number of slaves</i>	<i>Number of slaves punished</i>	<i>Slave expectation of punishment</i>	<i>Number of punishments</i>	<i>Punishments per slave punished</i>
Berbice River	8789	1715	19%	2851	1.66
Canje Creek	3426	788	23%	1480	1.87
Berbice Coast	3983	812	20%	1922	2.37
Corantyne Coast	2987	442	15%	726	1.64
New Amsterdam	137	51	37%	158	3.10

The table indicates some degree of differentiation between districts. With no roads and a heavy reliance on boats of various kinds, some of the districts were separated not so much by distance as by time and the changing tidal situation. The most remote district was the Corantyne Coast, which was also closest to Dutch Guiana, and consequently to sizeable communities of Maroons. It is not surprising that the punishment rates for this far flung district were the lowest for both the percentage of slaves punished and the number of punishments inflicted on those slaves punished. Managers would have needed to be wary in areas where help was not easily or quickly obtained. The district with by far the highest punishment rates was New Amsterdam itself, where the small number of slaves would have been under close observation and slave owners and managers enjoyed the security of available military backup.

Yet none of the above correlations come close to the differences in punishment regimes experienced between otherwise similar plantations. For example why did the coffee plantation Catherine's Burg with 126 slaves not need to punish any slaves in the eight month period while the coffee plantation Adelphi with 106 slaves found it necessary to inflict 196 punishments on 51 of its slaves? If plantation size, district

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<sup>616</sup> PB1, November 1826 to June 1827.

or crop type cannot completely explain such differences then some other factors must be considered. As suggested in Chapter Two, one of the most influential variables was the style and character of management. Table 7.9 lists the 24 plantations which changed their manager between December 1826 and January 1827. The table lists the average punishments per month for the period in 1826 under the old manager and the average punishments per month for the period in 1827 under the new manager.

TABLE 7.9:  
EFFECTS OF MANAGEMENT CHANGE ON PUNISHMENT REGIMES.<sup>617</sup>

<i>Plantation Name</i>	<i>Manager In 1826</i>	<i>1826 punishments per month</i>	<i>Manager In 1827</i>	<i>1827 punishments per month</i>
Inverness	Boyle, R.	0.00	Cameron, S.	1.17
Bloomfield	Brittlebank, F.	0.00	Rich, J.	2.17
Ithaca	Holboom, C.	0.00	Schwartz, W.	2.67
Blair CG	Chisholm, J.	0.00	Junor, H.	2.83
Warren	McConchie, W.	0.00	Oldfield, P.	3.83
No.5 & No.7	Nicolson, R.	0.00	McKenzie, R.	8.83
Fraser, Rynveld & Co	Rich, C.	0.50	Rynveld, S.	2.33
Lewis Manor	Stewart, J.	0.50	McWatt, A.	2.33
Den Arend	Bell, R.	1.00	Dwein, D.	13.67
Ross	Campbell, N.	1.50	Nicolson, W.	0.83
Gibraltar	Bowman, R.	1.50	Grant, W.	1.83
Support & Relief	Boyle, W.	2.00	Campbell, N.	0.17
Schumacher's Lust	Huskus, H.	2.00	Lankhorst, M.	2.00
Anna Clementia	Franzen, J.	2.00	Van Hoest, G.	4.33
De'Lief	Nannings, N.	3.00	OverEem, F.	2.17
Rotterdam	Lankhorst, M.	3.00	Lintz, T.	2.67
Goldstone Hall	Junor, J.	4.00	Scott, J.	20.33
Enfield	McKenzie, J.	5.00	McLean, C.	4.67
Friends	Scott, J.	6.00	Forsyth, S.	1.67
Bohemia	Melrose, P.	6.50	Elliott, J.	10.17
Smithson's Place	Manson, W.	8.00	McDonald, A.	7.83
Overysseel	Parker, F.	11.50	Downer, J.	7.00
Allness	Campbell, D.	22.50	Coventry, J.	10.00
Hermitage	Farnum, H.	25.00	Taitt, T.	5.50

Note for example how plantation No.5 & No.7 changed from a zero punishment plantation under the management of R. Nicholson, to one with more than eight

<sup>617</sup> PB1.

punishments per month after R. McKenzie took over. Den Arend changed under the management of Mr. Dwein with a thirteen fold increase in punishments. For the slaves on plantation Hermitage, however, conditions improved, reducing from 25 punishments per month under H. Farnum to 5.5 once T. Tait took charge. Of the 24 plantations, 13 recorded an increase in punishments following change, 10 showed a decrease and one did not change. The very different rates indicate the very different management techniques of the different managers and no doubt the slaves' responses to the new manager on those plantations.

Not surprisingly, slaves complained of management change when the new manager was less accommodating than the previous manager. Mr Gallez had changed the manager on plantation Ithaca, for example, but the change did not suit the slaves on the estate and they came to town to complain. George and Welcome, speaking for the gang, stated that they had tolerated the two former managers, Broeker and Wolff, but they could not abide their new manager Mr. Bierman:

Complainant says that in consequence of his good behaviour he was not flogged by the two last managers, he has always been known to be a good negro. He thinks it hard in his old days to be flogged by so young a man as Bierman. Lately Bierman took his complainants whip and flogged him with it till it broke, producing it. They are supplied very well with food but has not received any hats since Mr. Gallez bought the estate.<sup>618</sup>

In this case the sale of the property to Mr. Gallez resulted in a change in management. Mr. Gallez, as mentioned earlier, was a keen supporter of free coloureds in the colony and seemed to employ them exclusively to manage his various plantations and other businesses. Bierman may well have replaced the previous manager because Bierman was coloured while the previous managers had

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<sup>618</sup> CB2 5 May 1825.

been Dutch. Whatever cultural affiliations free coloureds had with slaves, when free coloureds became managers those affiliations appeared to count for little and these managers did not produce more co-operation between management and workers.<sup>619</sup>

On plantation Nieuw Vigilantie the slaves made it clear that they empathised with the need for managers to punish slaves when they transgressed established rules, but objected when a new manager wanted to change the rules or was unwilling to cooperate with the plantation workers. Ten slaves proffered a complaint to the Fiscal about the new manager Mr. Mittelholzer:

Our former attorney and manager Mr. Helder was a kind man, when he did punish one of us it was with severity, but he always showed us we were wrong, we therefore have submitted and never came to complain. Mr. Helder knew we were effective good negroes. He gave us all the indulgence that we ought to have and in return required all the work that could be performed. We feel the change most effectually and have put up with Mr. Mittelholzer till now but can do it no longer.<sup>620</sup>

These ten slaves had no illusions about slavery, about the contract made, and their role as slaves in Berbice. But their tolerance extended only to a form of slavery they had negotiated with their former manager. Complaint actions brought by slaves complaining of unjust punishment were relatively common, with some 345 such grievances representing about 18% of all grievances,<sup>621</sup> a good indication that such punishment was one aspect of slavery the slaves of Berbice would not tolerate. Further indication can be gleaned from the punishment records, where slaves who

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<sup>619</sup> A correlation between coloured managers and punishment regimes or complaint cases is difficult because we only learn of a manager's ethnicity if he provides testimony in the documents. Nevertheless, there seemed to be a higher number of coloured managers defending complaints than their overall numbers would indicate.

<sup>620</sup> CB2, 3 January 1825.

<sup>621</sup> Addition of the figures taken from unjust punishment work and socially related in Tables 3.2 in Chapter Three and 4.2 in Chapter Four.

were punished in a way they thought unfair would protest by running away or refusing to work.<sup>622</sup>

## Close

In general, slaves in Berbice had no uniform expectation of punishment. It would depend on the particular plantation, the region, the size of the plantation, the manager in charge, the general satisfaction among the workers, and many other factors, not the least of which was how well the slaves negotiated some degree of amelioration in the conditions of their enslavement, both as a collective covering an entire plantation, or as individuals working within a more a particular plantation regime. Slaves who were not punished did not represent slaves who were content their lot on life, but slaves who thought they had achieved a satisfactory acceptance with their position in society. An individual with good kin support, a wide base of friendships, and the support from a cohesive community would not have expected regular punishment. Discontent was palpable among those who were regularly punished or among those who regularly complained.

For many people, the lingering images of slavery are those which emphasise the physical treatment of slaves – slave ships whose human cargo was packed with

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<sup>622</sup> For example Pidores on plantation La Fraternité, punished 15 March 1827, ran away 16 March 1827; Thomas on plantation Friends, punished 17 February 1827, ran away 18 February; Graham on Blairmount, punished 23 May 1827, ran away 24 May 1827. Similarly Punch on plantation New Forest punished 9 January 1827, refused to work 10 January; Scipio on plantation Ross, punished 1 February, refused to work 2 February; Kendall on plantation Union, punished 18 January 1827, refused to work 19 January 1827, (All PB1).

clinical efficiency; dying men, hands tied, dangling by the neck from trees; shirtless black backs streaked with bloodied welts, the white overseer standing nearby, whip in hand. And who has not seen, among the pages of so many histories of slavery, one of the many graphic engravings of William Blake: “A negro hung alive by the Ribs to a Gallows”, and, “Flagellation of a Female Samboe Slave” – illustrations originally commissioned for a book on Surinam, the next door neighbour of Berbice.<sup>623</sup> While these images dramatically emphasise the inhumanity possible within slavery, they do not accurately represent the physical coercion of slaves, at least as it occurred in Berbice. Moreover, given that slaves were not the only people in the early nineteenth century who could expect to be coerced into life situations they found unattractive, there is the danger of representing such acts as being peculiar to slavery. Slaves in Berbice were the envy of no-one in Britain, but the slaves in Berbice may well have been equally unimpressed with the form of coercion that country offered many of its citizens.

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<sup>623</sup> John Gabriel Stedman, *Stedman's Surinam: life in eighteenth century slave society*, Richard Price and Sally Price (eds.), Baltimore 1992.



## Chapter 8: Values in Berbice

### Introduction

Slave life encompassed more than just the working, social and physical conditions of slavery, and though the values associated with kinship and culture were fundamental to the identity and psychological wellbeing of Berbice slaves, other values also affected slave society. Some of those values, such as freedom and materialism, were values that may have been entirely new to many of those slaves who had been born in Africa. Even among those creoles well accustomed to European cultural developments some significant changes during the 1820's would have been noticed. It is likely that slaves were increasingly influenced by information filtering through to the colony from abolitionists in Britain and elsewhere who spoke of freedom and emancipation. Perhaps even more influential during this period was the increasing role which cash and material accumulation were playing within slave life, along with their associated values. But it was not just slave values which were affecting black Berbice residents, for white values could and did also affect their lives. Especially the European values associated with race. Managers, proprietors and officials rarely mentioned the racial attributes of slaves, though the occasional comment such as that made by the Protector of Slaves that "Negroes were not very accurate judges of time",<sup>624</sup> and the racialisation of the language associated with slavery discussed below, inform us that racial ideologies were well established in Berbice society.

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<sup>624</sup> CB3, 8 December 1826.

## Freedom and freedoms

In modern literature and film, slaves are portrayed as being almost universally invested with strong desires for freedom. In the film *Amistad* the slaves learn their first word of English, 'free', and the viewers are left in no doubt what the struggle was all about – the quest for freedom by the captive Africans. While the image of Africans mouthing the word free contains a potent message for contemporary culture, it does little to enhance our understanding of the way Africans in the nineteenth century considered their lives. Orlando Patterson reminds us that in "almost all non-Western slaveholding societies there was no such status as a "free" person" and that "there was no word for freedom in most non-Western languages before contact with Western peoples".<sup>625</sup> Clever then, for the slaves on *Amistad*, to pick out as their first word of English one for which had no equivalence in their own language. Even taking freedom to mean simply the absence of enslavement, we still run into troubles with the Africans in the film. Natalie Zemon Davis points out that many of those *Amistad* slaves famously given freedom through court cases in America had been slaves in Africa well before being sold to the Spaniards.<sup>626</sup>

Slavery in various forms was well established in Africa long before Europeans entered the trade, and long after they left it. The slaves coming to Berbice during the late eighteenth and very early nineteenth century had some knowledge of slavery from their African experience. Of course Atlantic World historians are quick to distinguish African slavery from New World slavery, and rightly so, for the two

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<sup>625</sup> Patterson, *Slavery and social death*, p. 27

<sup>626</sup> See Natalie Zemon Davis, *Slaves on screen: film and historical vision*, Cambridge Mass. 2000, pp. 84 – 85.

systems were quite distinct. But so too were systems within Africa, and slavery varied greatly from one area of Africa to another. Slaves in Africa were drawn from the ranks of outsiders, and were therefore necessarily different from their masters, so that when slaves were taken from one area to a new area they could not be assured of understanding their prospects in their new society. New slaves within Africa, therefore, may well have encountered conditions of slavery unfamiliar to them. Africa was not a single entity, and consisted of numerous nations, which spanned yet more numerous customs and cultures.<sup>627</sup> Intertwined with an understanding of slavery was an understanding of non-slavery which, according to Orlando Patterson, began the process of developing the concept of freedom.<sup>628</sup> By the time African immigrants came to Berbice, this process of development was well advanced in European culture and society. In Africa, however, it was unlikely to have come that far, and concepts of personal and individual freedom would not have had the same resonance for those immigrants who came to Berbice from Africa as for those who came from Europe. Indeed, if Patterson is correct, they may not have had any idea of freedom at all. Consider the position of the West African tribe the Imbangala,<sup>629</sup> which has been the focus of intensive study by both Joseph C. Miller and Orlando Patterson. As Patterson points out, Miller sums up the tribe's ideology of freedom well:

The slave/free dichotomy, familiar to Western heirs of the Enlightenment, would not appear so obvious to the Imbangala, since

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<sup>627</sup> See for example, Walter Rodney, "African slavery and other forms of social oppression on the upper Guinea Coast in the context of the Atlantic slave-trade", in Colin A Palmer, (ed.), *The worlds of unfree labour*, Aldershot 1998. Also Basil Davidson, *West Africa before the colonial era: a history to 1850*, London 1998.

<sup>628</sup> Orlando Patterson, *Freedom, volume 1, freedom in the making of Western culture*, London 1991.

<sup>629</sup> The tribe provided many slaves over a long period of time to the New World. Patterson, *Slavery and social death*, p.25.

in Kasanje all status was seen as involuntary and no individual considered himself free in any sense close to Western theoretical notions of freedom.<sup>630</sup>

The problem for the slaves of the Imbangala was that their social duty was restricted to a single person. Insufficient evidence exists to be able to know precisely what preconceptions of slavery and freedom Africans brought with them to the New World. What preconceptions they did bring, however, certainly more closely resembled those of Africa than those of Europe.

Even in Europe, the modern concept of freedom was only very slowly finding its way into the consciousness of the population at large. Being 'free' in Berbice was to mean that a person was not a slave, but that did not end the process of emancipation. Among the most highly valued qualities of freedom to many slaves of Berbice was the quality of independence, or more precisely, the cessation of interference by managers and owners. For most slaves, attaining the legal status of 'free' was only one step further up the ladder, and those slaves who managed this step would soon find out that another obstacle still lay ahead: their colour.

Free coloured, free black, and freedman, were just more designations, better perhaps than 'slave', but still tightly wrapped up in a world only those from Africa could inhabit. Remember the "African black man named Sanya" from Chapter Five, who found life as a free indentured servant no different from that of a slave, and in fact worked beneath various slave "baasas" such as "baas George" and still found himself in the stocks and at the mercy of "white man country" laws, reliant on his fellow "countrymen" (all slaves) for help and sustenance. His label of indentured servant, and the non perpetual nature of his servitude did not seem to help him much

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<sup>630</sup> Joseph C. Miller, "Imbangala Lineage Slavery," in Miers and Kopytoff, eds., *Slavery in Africa*, in Orlando Patterson, *Freedom*, p.24.

at all: even his enslaved wife left him because he was a “new negro”.<sup>631</sup> A new label may have had an impact on a person’s self esteem, and perhaps afforded a sense of freedom and independence, but it was unlikely to have had a dramatic impact on an individual’s basic identity. Few slaves had taken unreservedly the identity of slave, and so becoming ‘free’ had a greater impact on one's rank in society than it had on one's identity.

Once free, a person then had to live among those for whom all persons of colour were, if not officially slaves, then at least physiologically so. Fogel and Engerman have pointed out that for “blacks, the alternative to slavery was not freedom but ... “quasi-freedom””<sup>632</sup> and that, whether in the North or the South, “free blacks led a precarious existence”.<sup>632</sup> Such might be said of Nancy Scott, a slave who belonged to the free coloured woman Elizabeth Bennett. Nancy owned a substantial house in New Amsterdam, and though unfree Nancy was probably financially better off than many, if not most, of the whites in the colony – as most whites were employed managers and overseers with few assets. Nancy hired out her house to many of her free coloured friends in the town. The differentiated status of these free coloureds, however, was at times of only marginal benefit, illustrated by the case Nancy brought before the Protector of Slaves in December of 1826:

After eight o'clock the music commenced ... Mr. Redman stood up and commenced a reel, when Mr. Simonelli (Under Sheriff) came in and desired the music to stop. Mr. Redman told Mr. Simonelli that it was a dance given by free people not slaves. Mr. Simonelli replied, that Nancy Scott was a slave ... Mr. Redman interfered, and said, that it was no matter whether I was a slave or not, as the people dancing were all free, and that the dance was made in my house to assist me.<sup>633</sup>

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<sup>631</sup> CB2, 29 July 1825.

<sup>632</sup> Fogel and Engerman, *Time on the cross*, p. 243.

<sup>633</sup> CB3, 28 December 1826.

Nancy Scott was molested and some of her property broken and stolen, she was only saved from the barracks by the interjection of Thomas Death, an "Englishman". The free coloureds were forced to abandon their dance and go to their homes. Though legally entitled to dance on 'non dancing'<sup>634</sup> days they had been effectively deprived of the right by the actions of some of the white residents.<sup>635</sup>

While some free coloureds had gained access to the upper echelons of Berbice society, as in the cases of Messrs. Linde and De Jong, or Mrs. Gallez, most maintained a close and intimate association with slaves. As illustrated by Nancy's case, that meant being subjected to some of the harassment and debasement associated with slaves. Moreover, it highlights the difficulties of assimilation which confronted those blacks wanting to pursue it. The problems of being black and free were compounded by various assumptions made about an individual's status based on his or her colour. In extreme cases one's hard won freedom could be put in jeopardy if one ventured too far from one's home. The case of Gabriel Innez illustrates the hazards of being both "a black man" and a stranger in a white ruled society.

I came from Dominique I was on board the Barbados gun Brig Capt. Flemen or Brimen, I was discharged at Antigua, the Brig is a Kings brig, I came to Barbados to receive my prize money from Mr. Caven, I sailed from Barbados in a little sloop called Thomas Spencer about the Islands, Capt. Paisley met me at Barbados engaged me to go to Demerara for a load of plantains, ... He took me to Surinam and Berbice. I asked him for payment, instead of doing so he took me to the sea coast of Surinam and sold me to a Mr. Ferrier, ... I told him I was a free man, on Capt. Paisley's return Mr. Ferrier said 'I cant buy a free man' and he gave me back ... I was with a French man named Coguiere, he sent me to work on board of a Brig. I got to Nickerie then the Frenchman sold me to a gentleman named Abensetts. I told him I was free and I was going to see my friends at Dominica and that

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<sup>634</sup> Slaves were only permitted to dance on designated days.

<sup>635</sup> Though some of these were later prosecuted.

I belonged to the Kings Service ... I run away from Mr. Abensetts and came here to Seek my right, I belonged to a black Regiment at Dominica under Governor Johnston.<sup>636</sup>

It seemed that every time Gabriel got out of one illegal enslavement, he was once more enslaved. He eventually got away, but the case highlights the difficulties of freedom for all those of African descent living in the region. For Gabriel the differences between freedom and slavery were important, but the contrast between the two would not have been so stark.

It is unclear whether slaves always pursued freedom when given the opportunity. In Chapter Six we saw the reluctance of slaves in Berbice to take freedom in the bush. Even more interesting were those slaves who were given the opportunity of legitimate freedom in non-slave holding societies, but rejected the chance. For example the slave Hendrick who worked for Colonel Nixon "at one time accompanied his master to the United States of America, where he might have claimed his freedom, but ... chose to return with his master to this Colony".<sup>637</sup> Perhaps instrumental in these cases was the fact that slaves sought community over individual freedom, and for slaves to pursue freedom in areas outside their social milieu offered few attractions.

That is not to say that slaves did not like the idea of freedom, just that the balance between the form of freedom on offer, and the costs of attaining that freedom, was not so clearly loaded on the side of freedom as to make the choice obvious. Gaining freedom had the potential to afford an individual a considerable advancement in Berbice society. Some former slaves, or descendents of slaves, became slave owners, such as Linde and Favre mentioned previously. Some became

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<sup>636</sup> CB2, 4 March 1824.

<sup>637</sup> Letter, H. Beard, Lieutenant Governor to H. M. Bennett, Fiscal, 29 May 1827, CO 116/143.

managers of large plantations like the employed managers of Mr. Gallez. But these were very much the exception even among the free coloured population in the colony, and it is doubtful if many slaves dreamed of one day owning or managing a large cotton plantation. Gaining freedoms *inside* slavery, however, had a constant and dynamic appeal. The slave Thomas, for example, was not so much concerned about the socio-psychological value of freedom but the freedoms he was able to achieve inside slavery. Of course these 'freedoms', once gained, were cherished and hard to surrender. In the case of Thomas, when his freedoms were threatened, it drove him to attempt suicide. Thomas had been hired out to Keen's Foundry as a blacksmith, from where he would often absent himself, and "went about shoeing horses ... on his own account" despite "a positive order that no smith shall take tools out of the shop" which he "paid no respect to". When caught in the workshop after an absence of eight days he refused to adhere to his employer's orders and "ran towards the river, and threatened to drown himself if pursued". Needless to say, he was pursued and he consequently "jumped in the river" where some men in a boat tried to retrieve him "but as often as they came up to him he would dive and remain so long under the water that [Thomas Keen] became alarmed". He was "entreated to surrender, but would not" and was only taken in after he became exhausted. Thomas's private trade and his freedom to come and go from his workplace, represented the kind of freedom worth dying for.

In one way slaves may even have had one freedom that was largely denied many workers and peasants of Europe at the time. This was the freedom of self expression. Slaves, like sailors and soldiers, were often insolent. In Berbice some 7% of all



punishments were for insolence or assault on managers.<sup>638</sup> Many more instances of slaves' disrespectful conduct towards their managers and masters went unpunished. Slaves routinely let their feelings about situations or individuals be known. They could not be sacked or thrown off the land as would have been the case for workers or peasants had they been insolent to their bosses or landlords. For workers and peasants the costs of displeasing their masters was simply too severe – dismissal, loss of home, loss of livelihood, starvation and family separation. Of course slaves and sailors had to pay for their insolence, but the payment (usually bedstocks for slaves, or the whip for sailors)<sup>639</sup> was brief and the long term consequences were negligible. The continual, almost vigilant, need for the powerless to keep their thoughts to themselves, to bottle up their feelings towards their masters and maintain a pleasant demeanour in the company of the powerful represented a loss of freedom which affected the European underclasses far more so than it did Berbice slaves. Even the Fiscal was not immune to disrespectful conduct from slaves and was often “under the necessity of calling them to order”.<sup>640</sup> Of course, this would have been small consolation for enslavement, but it illustrates the context of control common to the period and makes the point that slaves were not axiomatically worse off than other underclasses of the time.

Hopes for freedom in the broader context of individual liberty may well have begun to influence the slaves of Berbice, though there is no evidence of that in the Fiscal's documents. And it is difficult know what effect the abolitionist discourses

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<sup>638</sup> In the eight months covered by the punishment record books there were 486 punishments for insolence or assault on management out of a total of 6,936 punishments (PB1).

<sup>639</sup> Of the 486 slaves punished for insolence 393 were punished with confinement and 92 were flogged (PB1). For sailors 37% of floggings were for insolence and disobedience (Denning, *Mr. Bligh's bad language*, p.114)

<sup>640</sup> CB2 4 March 1824.

on the qualities of liberty and free will had on Berbice slaves. Much of the information coming from the abolitionist movement had to do with the conditions of slavery, rather than the idealised state of freedom sought by many Europeans. And though the juxtaposition of British workers and Caribbean slaves were hot political topics in London and Manchester, such complex socio-political contrasts were unlikely to have had much of an impact on the slave population of Berbice. Information may have filtered through from the missionaries, but slaves did not have to study abolitionist pamphlets to learn about the horrors of slavery, and information on liberty was sketchy and unlikely to have found a wide audience in Berbice.

One of the most important freedoms slaves sought was to escape the interference of owners and managers, not just for themselves, but also their spouses, offspring and their broader community. It was not individual freedom which was sought so much as communal freedoms, the chance for kin groups to develop independently within Berbice society. In any case, legal individual freedom, as the friends of Nancy Scott could attest, did not prevent various types of interference from continuing. The freed person still lived in Berbice and was still a 'negro'. The transformation from slave to free coloured required careful management in a society where being different was anything but an ideal. To be normal in Berbice, one had to be a slave or an ex-slave.<sup>641</sup> Kinship structures often depended on shared values and circumstances, and these were woven into the matrix of Berbice slavery. Being free in Berbice was seldom important enough to risk disturbing one's kinship group.

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<sup>641</sup> In 1827 there were 19,360 slaves in Berbice (Higman, *Slave populations*, p.418) and in 1830 there were 570 whites and 1,661 freedmen (Ibid., p.433). Thus about 90 percent of the population were slaves, and 97.4 percent would have been slaves or ex slaves.

## Immutable race

One good reason why slaves looked to advance themselves within the confines of slavery was the growing realisation among them that, with or without slavery, they would always be regarded as inferior by white society because of their colour and their race. In his long battle for the untouchables of India, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar railed against the institution of caste in that country:

The law of slavery permitted emancipation. Once a slave always a slave was not the fate of the slave. In untouchability there is no escape. Once an Untouchable always an Untouchable.<sup>642</sup>

Slaves everywhere in the New World by the early nineteenth century may have found a certain eerie resonance in that observation. The racial nature of slavery meant that Africans in Berbice were cast by their biological heritage into a state of untouchability by their society. "Once a slave always a slave" may not have been the case, but once a negro always a negro was very much the situation that those with African appearance faced in the New World. In such circumstances black freedom was reduced to a mere technicality, with nothing like the potency it had for peoples of European extraction. The racialisation of slavery in the New World is a subject in itself and clearly beyond the scope of this thesis to fully unravel, but it is worth examining within the context of choice to understand how pervasive it had become in New World societies, and thus how difficult it had become for blacks and coloureds to gain equal status for themselves in a white world.

The problem of racism has persisted after many other features of slavery and colonisation have long since vanished, and the history and nature of its incipient

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<sup>642</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, *Dr Ambedkar's thought*, B. K. Ghatak, (ed.), New Delhi 1997, p.99.

development remains contentious. Many historical perspectives on the development of racism have looked to the nineteenth century as the key period when a complete ideology of race developed. Most, like Ivan Hannaford,<sup>643</sup> restrict their examination to clearly articulated discourses specifically about race to determine the genesis of its social construction in the West. Barbara Fields would have us believe that the American South required tuition in racist ideology from the Northern states during the mid to late nineteenth century before adopting the concept whole heartedly.<sup>644</sup> Even the venerable Winthrop Jordan believes that American racism, the “cancer of the revolution”, really developed only in the nineteenth century.<sup>645</sup> Michael Banton goes even further, maintaining that “there was no clear-cut nineteenth century idea of race”.<sup>646</sup>

One only has to read the racial diatribes contained within Edward Long's *History of Jamaica*, originally published in 1774, to know that an explicit racial ideology existed at this time, even if it was rather crude and not developed as fully as it would later in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>647</sup> The differences, however, from the point of view of African Americans, would have been entirely academic. Thomas Thistlewood, an eighteenth century overseer, manager and planter in Jamaica, genuinely puzzled over the place his African slaves occupied in the world order of being; slaves with whom he lived, wed and procreated. When he asked the question: “If the negroes are the seed of Cain, how were they Preserved in the

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<sup>643</sup> Ivan Hannaford, *Race: the history of an idea in the West*, Baltimore 1996, pp. 187-188.

<sup>644</sup> Barbara J. Fields, “Ideology and race in American history”, in J. Morgan Kousser and James M. McPherson, (eds.), *Region, race, and reconstruction*, Oxford 1982, p. 168

<sup>645</sup> Winthrop D. Jordan, *White over black: American attitudes toward the negro, 1550-1812*, Chapel Hill 1968.

<sup>646</sup> Michael Banton, *The idea of race*, Cambridge 1977, p. 5.

<sup>647</sup> Long, *History of Jamaica*, Vols. 1 and 2, London 1970.

Universal Deluge(?)",<sup>648</sup> he was pondering an emergent theme in the rationalisation for the enslavement of Africans. The only explanation for the existence of negroes was either that they were the descendents of the damned (Cain, and hence fit to suffer and toil for their betters) or, worse, considered to be some other order of being (who came upon the Ark following the "Universal Deluge" in some other guise), and were therefore outside the considerations of common human dignity.

It was the ape which provided Edward Long with the most compelling evidence of the place of Negros in the chain of being, though not the only one. His list of evidence includes the "bestial fleece" of hair, the "bestial smell" of their bodies, and the "black colour of lice which infest their bodies" a type which they share with "almost all animals"<sup>649</sup>. Such characteristics were not those Long wanted to see infiltrating white purity. Long's animal references came from a deep seated notion that Negros were biologically different from whites<sup>650</sup>. Africans, for Long, represented a stage between animals, and especially oran-outangs, and whites:

I do not think that an oran-outang husband would be any dishonour to an Hottentot female<sup>651</sup>

That the oran-outang and some races of black men are very nearly allied, is, I think, more than probable<sup>652</sup>

[the oran-outang] has in form a much nearer resemblance to the Negroe race, than the latter bear to white men<sup>653</sup>

In Long's schema, the different races (including some monkeys) formed gradations of improvement towards Holy perfection, the white man. These

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<sup>648</sup> TTD, 12 June 1757, p. 89.

<sup>649</sup> Long, *History of Jamaica*, Vol. II, p. 352.

<sup>650</sup> George Metcalf, "Introduction to the second edition", in Edward Long, *History of Jamaica*, Vol. 1, London 1970., p. viii.

<sup>651</sup> Long, *History of Jamaica*, Vol. II, p. 364.

<sup>652</sup> Ibid., Vol. II, p. 365.

<sup>653</sup> Ibid., Vol. II, p. 371.

gradations are intellectual constructions, fully equipped with pseudo scientific taxonomic detail. They represent a very extreme form of racial hierarchy, but nevertheless conformed to the basic understanding of the different place the Negro race held in Jamaica. Like subsequent racists in the United States, he believed that any dilution of white perfection by miscegenation was an abomination. As a great deal of miscegenation had already occurred, and was likely to continue, Long focused much of his attention on systems of social order which would strictly limit the mixture of the three major groups of Jamaicans: the blacks, the browns and the whites.

[Mulattos] would then form the centre of connexion between the two extremes, producing a regular establishment of three ranks of men, dependent on each other, and rising in a proper climax of subordination, in which the Whites would hold the highest place.<sup>654</sup>

The mulattos were very troublesome for Long; they were, after all, half white. Although he gave much attention to fitting them into an exact hierarchy of race (which in any case already existed in Jamaica), his concomitant motive was to ensure that their numbers did not increase by any means other than by natural increase from within their own social group; that is, that they didn't mix up (with whites) or down (with blacks) and that the numbers were definitely not increased from further mixture of whites and blacks. One of his schemes to reduce the number of mulattos was to award all mulatto children with emancipation. His argument was that plantation owners would thus be deprived of the offspring of their slaves unless the child was an "unmixed breed of their Blacks"<sup>655</sup>. Long's arguments may not have been as careful or well structured as the arguments presented by later racial theorists, but

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<sup>654</sup> Ibid., Vol. II, p. 333.

<sup>655</sup> Ibid., Vol. II, p. 333.

they clearly indicate that an ideology of race existed in the West Indies by the period covered within this thesis.

Had slavery lain at the source of the degradation of blacks in the Americas, then when slavery was finally conquered their relative position in their societies should have improved. At least in the Anglo-American New World, this did not happen. Throughout the Anglo-American New World a fixed and consistent racist ideology, based on a permanent biological division between Africans and Europeans, existed in white society, and this ideology was manifested within the documents and records of the period by a fixed and consistent vocabulary of race – a vocabulary which super-ordinated racial description over all other descriptive characteristics, including sex, age and an individual's status of liberty. Slaves had become synonymous with Africans, the word slave synonymous with the word negro. But the word negro had a much more enduring usage, and it identified a much more important characteristic than the word slave. In the Fiscal's documents the word negro dominates the word slave, even when used by slaves themselves. This is not surprising because, as suggested by Benjamin Whorf, there was an involuntary agreement on vocabulary by all members of a society:

We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize in this way -- an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language. The agreement is, of course, an implicit and unstated one, BUT ITS TERMS ARE ABSOLUTELY OBLIGATORY; we cannot talk at all except by subscribing to the organization and classification data which the agreement decrees.<sup>656</sup>

The testimonies of the managers and slaves in Berbice differed in content and purpose, but they all used the same social language. Their topics and their styles

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<sup>656</sup> Whorf, *Language, thought, and reality*, pp. 213-214.

were entirely idiosyncratic, but the language they used was obligatory. In the complaint record for the years 1824 and 1825 a survey of the personal identifiers reveals that racial classification was paramount. Whenever the status of a person was in doubt, such as when witnesses or defendants may have been assumed to be white because of their position or their use of a second name, they were racially identified. Madam Louis McRae, for example, had to be identified by the clerk as “a free coloured woman”,<sup>657</sup> in case anyone thought that someone with such a complicated name might have been white. Managers and persons in authority also needed racial clarification, so that the clerk felt it necessary to include this information without it having any bearing on the subject of the testimony, for example:

Now Mr. De Jong is our manager we are oppressed by him (De Jong is a man of colour).<sup>658</sup>

The clerk was recording a statement made by a slave, but interrupted the flow of the testimony to insert the distinction about Mr. De Jong because he was a manager, and managers would ordinarily have been thought to be white. Similarly we have:

J. Linde the proprietor (a coloured man)<sup>659</sup>

Mr. Bierman the present manager, a coloured man...<sup>660</sup>

The racial term negro had all but supplanted the term slave within the text of the testimonies and many other documents of the period. Indeed, such was the domination, that the word ‘negro’ outnumbered the word ‘slave’ more than ten to one in the Fiscal’s documents, with similar ratios found in many other documents

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<sup>657</sup> CB2, 17 May 1825.

<sup>658</sup> CB2, 29 August 1825.

<sup>659</sup> CB2, 5 March 1825.

<sup>660</sup> CB2, 5 May 1825.



concerned with West Indian slavery.<sup>661</sup> Recall Sanya the indentured carpenter, described as an “African black man”, who summed up the situation for most of Berbice’s inhabitants when he considered that “so long I was in white man country I must do as ordered”. Though Sanya was not a slave but a free indentured servant, he would have struggled to detect the difference within his relationships with the white authorities, slave or free, he was black and that was all there was to it.<sup>662</sup>

This is not to say that all whites were racist, or that all blacks felt the pressure of racist ideologies. Indeed many whites in the colony associated with blacks in ways that clearly indicated inclusive social relations. Many of the relations between managers and slaves transcended race and were ordered solely by their appointed roles on working estates. But most of these are examples of whites joining black society and not the other way around.

This intertwining of race and slavery has created an ongoing dilemma for the descendents of African migrants to the New World – their race has become a marker of their origins. While any white could have been any one of a dozen vanguard immigrants, from lowly convicts to lofty officials, the ancestors of African Americans are rarely in doubt; they must surely have been slaves.

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<sup>661</sup> See also for example Thistlewood’s diary (TTD), or the records of John Pool (John Pool, Rector, Westmoreland Jamaica 1755, Register of the Parish of Westmoreland, from the Bright family records, University of Melbourne Microfilm 97/026), both of which indicates an even more marked tendency to emphasize racial identifiers.

<sup>662</sup> CB2, 29 July 1825.

### Materialism and style

Perhaps slavery had, as suggested by Saidiya V. Hartman, “spawned proprietorial conceptions of the self”, and thus awoken in slaves a new sense of the value of property of all kinds. It is impossible to know of any such connection, but that slaves had developed their own value system around property, materialism and style there can be no doubt. Sufficient money could certainly buy freedom, but even small amounts of cash could buy slaves some freedom of expression, and an opportunity to advance themselves within their own community. The documents reveal that slaves expressed a concern over material assets that in itself questions our general notions of slavery. If freedom was the goal of most slaves in Berbice, they did not mention it, but they regularly mentioned their clothes, their houses, and their dignity. If there was one feature of slave life which bettered bush life it was the opportunity that living and working in the colony provided to accumulate the material assets that slaves desired. Slaves had stuff, and increasingly valued it. Larry Hudson argues that slaves in the antebellum American south had also acquired materialist values, indeed he believes that this accumulation of wealth had led to social stratification within slave society which resulted in “clear social differences among the enslaved”.<sup>663</sup>

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<sup>663</sup> Hudson, “All that cash”, p.77.

The question is, however, how much of that stuff, and its value, was attributed to the slave owners and management (and associated European values), and how much to the slave? That is, did slave owners significantly affect the material aspirations of slaves or did slaves form their own system of materialist values independent of their masters? That slaves could accumulate wealth by remaining slaves on the plantation rather than escaping to the bush does not necessarily mean that they were therefore controlled by masters via their desires for material possessions.

It has often been assumed that material offerings acted within the slave system as a powerful positive incentive for slaves to endure slave labour; the proverbial carrot to counterbalance the overseer's stick. But for the carrot to work then masters and managers would need to know the precise place such material aspirations had within slave society. Much attention has been given by historians to the significance of these rewards as a means of slave labour control. Complex studies such as the one by Charles Kahn's chapter in *Without Consent or Contract* seek to determine whether the carrot or the stick was the most cost effective method of getting slaves to do their work. Kahn sets out to "illustrate why profit maximising, non-altruistic plantation masters might find it in their self-interest to stray from the apparently least-cost means of maintaining their chattel".<sup>664</sup> But such models speak of more of managerial behaviour than slave behaviour. Indeed, by accepting or refusing certain rewards, which would have prompted management to experiment with alternative rewards, managerial behaviour was affected as much by the interchange as was slave behaviour, and quite possibly to the benefit of both parties. While it might be so that

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<sup>664</sup> Charles Kahn, "An agency theory approach to slave punishments and rewards", in Robert William Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman, (eds.), *Without consent or contract: conditions of slave life and the transition to freedom: technical papers volume 2*, New York 1992, p.551.

managers who practiced leniency and generosity were able to extract better productivity from their slaves, this does not inform us much about what slaves valued within their own society. Even if a slave responded positively to a particular reward, this does not tell us much about how that reward fitted within the slaves' system of values.

The material rewards of industry and Western prosperity, and the emerging Western value system based on money, did not elude the slaves of Berbice, but the way those values were translated into slave culture was entirely driven by the slaves themselves, no doubt with continual reference to value systems brought with them from Africa. What constituted a reward, therefore, was determined more by the slaves than by the master. Indeed, management often misinterpreted slave values, and could fall into the trap of seeing the slaves' material values as extensions of their own value system. Slaves had constructed a society which apportioned status according to a complex formula of their own making, and the accumulation of material worth, achieving a valued position, and striking a certain style were fundamental parts of this construction. Accommodating the perceived needs of plantation investors by their work and their compliance with the slave system was traded in part for the slaves' ability to further their own interests, and the material handouts by proprietors formed but one part of this procedure. Much if not most of the acquisition of material and stylistic worth was accomplished by slaves independent of their master's generosity or cost-efficient slave management techniques. Most slaves were satisfied with a base level of legal allowances, very much akin to a base salary, and they rarely relied on those allowances as their sole means of support. More important, slaves required from their managers the time and

energy they needed to do work on their own behalf, either in trade, in agricultural production, or in private work.

Complaints related to material wealth and sartorial appearance are a good indication of the overall importance that materialism and style had for slaves. Included below are those grievances which either directly or indirectly affected the prosperity of slaves. In Table 8.1 the first group of grievances, concerning allowances, money, and economic interference, could be seen as having a direct impact on slave wealth. It might be thought that food allowances were more closely associated with bare sustenance than they were with materialism. However, as the first complaint recorded by the Fiscal illustrated, food allowances had more to do with slave prosperity than slave nutrition.<sup>665</sup> The second group of grievances, that of workload and worktime, had an indirect, but as mentioned above, significant, impact on the capacity of slaves to generate their own income. The longer and harder slaves had to work for the manager, the less time and energy were available to slaves to work on their own behalf.

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<sup>665</sup> As mentioned in Chapter One, the case involved a group of slaves complaining that they received only six cassava cakes a week, and though it emerged these were being fed to their hogs which they raised for sale, the Fiscal nevertheless ruled that customary allowances should be paid regardless of the slaves' nutritional needs, (CB1, 2 February 1919).

TABLE 8.1:  
MATERIAL GRIEVANCES (1819-1827).<sup>666</sup>

	<i>Number of Grievances</i>	<i>Percentage of total</i>
Allowance, food	203	10.53%
Allowance, clothing	107	5.55%
Money or property owed	20	1.04%
Interference in slave economy	67	3.48%
Housing grievance	4	0.21%
<i>Complaints with direct effect on material wealth</i>	<i>401</i>	<i>20.80%</i>
Worktime grievance	305	15.82%
Workload grievance	209	10.84%
<i>Complaints with indirect effect on material wealth</i>	<i>514</i>	<i>26.66%</i>
<i>Total with some effect on material wealth</i>	<i>915</i>	<i>47.46%</i>
Other grievances	1013	52.54%
Total Grievances	1928	100.00%

Consequently, more than 47 percent of slave grievances were in some way associated with issues which could affect slave material well being. While the precise values associated with materialism would have differed within slave culture, the general value of materialist ideology was recognised at all levels of Berbice society, and so we find, from Chart 2.4 in Chapter Two, that those grievances concerned with the material lives of slaves enjoyed a higher than average level of successful outcomes in complaint actions. In disputes over the provision of such allowances or money owed, the testimony of the manager or owner concerned was often insufficient evidence to defend the charges, and such defendants had to provide documentary support, such as plantation journals or shipment papers, to successfully defend material complaints from slaves. For the grievance of money owed, the success rate was second only to claims of manumission.

<sup>666</sup> Data assembled from CB1, CB2, CB3, January 1819 to August 1827.

As many cases already reviewed have demonstrated, disputes over allowances were recognised in Berbice to have had only a partial relationship with physical well being. Moving from food allowances to those concerning clothing, the connection with material values and style is even more evident. In a recent work by Shane White and Graham White, *Stylin'*, the authors explore the role style and appearance had within African American culture and its importance within slaves' own value system. They relate the example of the slave Daniel on a North Carolina plantation and the value he placed in his appearance, a value that the owner George Swain had difficulty reconciling with slavery. Slaves were seen to have "rearranged and adapted the garments given them by their owners", evidence of cultural differentiation and the development of an African American style.<sup>667</sup> Similarly in Berbice, the largely African population quickly adopted and adapted Western clothing and this clothing soon took on a meaning and importance far beyond the requirements that decency or the balmy tropical climate demanded.

The role of materialism and style in Berbice culture can be found in the symbolic value of hats. Judy on plantation Port Mourant, for example, was so concerned with her hat that she was prepared to take up arms to defend it, and was consequently punished for "cutting the girl Present across the head with a cutlass in a scuffle about a hat".<sup>668</sup> Hats signified formality and standing within the slave community slaves had created, even if these superficially reflected similar standards characteristic of Europe. When Philip complained about the treatment of his wife and child he did so by "quitting his work without permission & presenting himself in

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<sup>667</sup> Shane White and Graham White, *Stylin': African American expressive culture, from its beginnings to the Zoot Suit*, Ithaca 1998, p.6.

<sup>668</sup> PB1, Port Mourant, 2 December 1826.

a hostile manner armed with a cutlass, with his hat on his head to dispute with the manager”.<sup>669</sup> Imagine the hardship of those slaves who were deprived of such an important article of apparel, such as Ian from Broer’s lust who had “neither hat nor jacket”.<sup>670</sup> One recourse for such people was to complain to the Fiscal, as did a woodcutting gang belonging to L. F. Gallez whose members complained they “had no hats, no pots, only 2 razors for all of us”. Note that the hats were at the top of their list.<sup>671</sup> Another group of slaves belonging to Mr. Gallez and working on plantation Ithaca also complained of hatlessness – while they were supplied “very well with food”, they had “not received any hats since Mr. Gallez bought the estate”.<sup>672</sup> Cocoroco, a cowherd, complained that he was “obliged to buy my own caps to wear”, and the Protector noted that he was dressed in the “ordinary dress of a cattle-minder, viz. a jacket, a cap, and a hat”.<sup>673</sup>

That slaves bitterly fought for such articles of clothing many would consider unnecessary in a climate where temperatures rarely fell below 25 degrees Celsius even at night, precisely defined the role clothing had in Berbice society. It was not just a matter of avoiding nakedness, or of protection from the elements; it was to do with style, social position, and material aspirations. Alart on De Resolutie “by immediately putting on his jacket”, demonstrated not just what the manager called a “contempt of caution” but also an affirmation of his dignity, status and self determination.<sup>674</sup> It is not surprising then, that Managers rarely got away with issuing an allowance which fell below acceptable standards. John Bart, Ocean, and

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<sup>669</sup> PB1, De Resolutie, 27 March 1827.

<sup>670</sup> CB2, 27 April 1825.

<sup>671</sup> CB2, 21 September 1824.

<sup>672</sup> CB2, 5 April 1825.

<sup>673</sup> CB3, 31 July 1827.

<sup>674</sup> PB1, De Resolutie, 9 January 1827.



Johnston, leading the whole gang, were certainly determined not to let the standards drop on plantation Spring Garden:

Having received their allowance of clothing yesterday morning these 3 came & threw the whole of it in the manager's face after which the greater part of the rest followed their example.<sup>675</sup>

The depth of feeling was such in this case that the slaves bypassed the normal channels of complaint in favour of immediate and provocative action, and so the gang had thrown "the whole of it in the manager's face". A similar response greeted the manager of plantation Highbury where the women of the estate, led by Mary Ann, Nancy, Minerva and Phoebe, also complained of an inadequate allowance of clothing. Mary Ann, as spokeswoman, stated:

Clothing was given out last Sunday to the gang, the women each received 1 Jacket a flannel petty coat, a hat, flannels osnaburgs and 1 Hhos. The woman's gang generally were dissatisfied, since they worked too hard to get so small a proportion of clothing and threw it down.<sup>676</sup>

This contemptuous tossing of clothes on the ground or at managers' faces perfectly illustrates that the allowance of clothing provided slaves had transcended the bare necessities of corporal cover and entered into a value system where it was considered better to have nothing at all than shoddy merchandise, very much like someone might choose not to go to a dance for want of some stylish garments. In one of the rare complaint actions brought by a proprietor,<sup>677</sup> the owner of plantation Recumzigt, A. J. Glassius, had to seek help from the authorities to discipline his slaves after they had complained of the quality and quantity of the clothing allowance they were to receive.

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<sup>675</sup> PB1, Spring Garden, 19 February 1827.

<sup>676</sup> CB2, 25 February 1824.

<sup>677</sup> These complaints were treated identically by the Fiscal to those cases brought by slaves, but have been separated in the database.

About half an hour after ... on its coming to the turn of negro August to receive his [clothing allowance], he had taken up the osnaburgs, and, after examining it, had exclaimed, "Is this the osnaburgs we are to receive? I will not have it;" that his example had been followed by most of the others ... to satisfy myself ... I sent for it, measured it, and found it full three ells; the same quantity I have ever given since I have resided on the property, a period of sixteen years. I ordered the drivers to go to August, and direct him to come to me; the drivers returned, saying he refused to do so. The overseer went to the negro houses, to direct August to come to me ... and explain the cause of his refusing the osnaburgs. The overseer, however, returned, saying, August, on his coming up, cried out, "Come, my lads, let us be off; and he was immediately joined by five-and-twenty others, who proceeded on the estate towards the back. They took the beef, fish, barley, tobacco and pipes, and went off."<sup>678</sup>

The Fiscal investigated and examined the estate journals over the past five years. He also examined the cloth which was "found of an excellent quality, and a few pieces taken out of the heap and measured and found to contain three ells, five ells". For his part, in defence, the slave August claimed that only "lately jackets and hats had been given them on account of the arrival of their young mistress, but no checks or osnaburgs; and therefore seeing so small a quantity given last Sunday, he with some others got dissatisfied and refused to take it". As with most complaints brought by proprietors or managers, this one was successful and August and Conraad were punished for insolence and "unbecoming conduct". The depth of feeling by the slaves over the matter had alarmed Glassius sufficiently to suffer the expense of the Fiscal's fees in order to cope with the situation. He had earlier requested Captain Favre of the Burgher Militia for "the assistance of a militia guard, in consequence of the insubordinate conduct of twenty-six negroes attached to his estate". In the end the matter was resolved, not so much by punishing August, but by the Fiscal agreeing with the slaves that the "quantity allowed them was not sufficient" but that their method of protest was not acceptable and that "in the event of any grievance

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<sup>678</sup> CB1, 2 June 1819.

existing, it was the duty of the slave to represent and seek redress from this master, and if not succeeding, then to look for such redress from higher authority". Finally the "whole gang appeared satisfied with this argument; and the negro August, after punishment, acknowledged the impropriety of his conduct". A slave's appearance was closely linked to his or her social values. Moreover, the extent to which slave social values were recognised and accepted by the authorities is evident in the Fiscal's eagerness to strike a compromise with the slaves, agreeing that they deserved more from the owner, even though he had earlier determined the quantity sufficient.<sup>679</sup>

That slaves were concerned with their appearance does not mean that this had been developed by white authority as a means of slave control, but of course it would not have precluded managers from exploiting the situation. But the documents suggest that the provision of clothing was an annoyance and an expense many slave owners only complied with out of necessity to maintain slave co-operation and to comply with customary and official standards set by the colonial authorities rather than slave owners. The significance of clothing, and hence, slave concern over their appearance, was recognised by officials and formed part of the two way accommodation process which kept the colony functioning. The case of Jerry who belonged to Frederika Fishback (described by the Protector as an "ignorant free coloured woman") evinced both the lure of materialism and accommodation by authorities. The Protector was reluctant to pursue a prosecution against Fishback for whipping Jerry, and so mediated a compromise whereby Jerry would be compensated by Fishback with "a pair of trousers, a jacket, a hat, and a shirt". In

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<sup>679</sup> CB1, 2 June 1819.

return Jerry would drop his case against his mistress.<sup>680</sup> This accommodation on the part of the colonial officials would have had a significant impact on acceptable managerial behaviour.

Not included in Table 7.5 were disputes which slaves had with other slaves over matters involving property. Most of these disputes would have been settled via the mediation of managers or owners, but some found their way to the officials of the colony. An interesting dispute between Zabeth and her former husband Zouw centred over a box of clothes. Zabeth and Zouw had lived together, but Zouw was transferred for a time to plantation Middelburg's Welvaren. When he came back he found that Zabeth had taken up with another man, which "did not prevent all three living on terms of amity". But when Zabeth was herself then transferred she took Zouw's box to keep her clothes. Zouw then broke into Zabeth's new house to take the box back. Now as it happened, included among Zabeth's clothes were two frocks which Zabeth had not completed paying the seamstress, Sophia, who was still owed f3.10 (3 guilders, 10) on the items. It then appeared that Zabeth, on learning of her clothes being taken by Zouw had herself stolen some items from Zouw, being "a rule, saw, jug, and three pairs of trousers". Ultimately the dispute was settled by the Protector, and various exchanges of property were made. The pre-eminence of property in the dispute highlights its place in Berbice society. Zouw had taken with equanimity Zabeth's new man, but not the loss of his box. Zabeth had happily changed master, but would not tolerate the loss of some clothes. Sophia did not complain of a physical confrontation with Zabeth which had taken place, but wanted

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<sup>680</sup> CB3, 22 June 1827.

assurance she would get the money owed to her. Zouw would return Zabeth's clothes which he had taken only if he got back his rule, saw, and trousers.<sup>681</sup>

If clothing was important to slaves, then land was even more significant to the material wellbeing of slaves and represented one of the most effective means of generating cash. The traditional provision grounds allotted slaves afforded even the humblest field worker the opportunity to materially better their lives. This was illustrated by Baron on Augsburg, in a dispute over plot of land:

Some time ago my brother died leaving his wife and two children under my care, also a piece of ground for provisions. This piece of ground was taken some time afterwards by another negro belonging to the estate. This caused a dispute between this negro and myself. We brought it before the manager Mr. Barnstede in consequence of the other negro refusing to give it up. The manager said so and directed the land should remain in possession of the other man.<sup>682</sup>

Note that Baron considered the land inheritable, and believed that he possessed a kind of semi-formal title. Even though these lands were basically provision grounds provided by the plantation owner, it is not clear that they could at any time be withdrawn. Slaves maintained a kind of customary title which could not be trifled with by managers or the colonial administration. The formality surrounding such land transactions underlines the stake-holding slaves had in their particular plantations. The importance of land, and the independent means of financial support would later be highlighted when most of the slaves abandoned plantations after emancipation and whole communities took up independent agricultural activities on their own land.<sup>683</sup>

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<sup>681</sup> CB3, 22 August 1827.

<sup>682</sup> CB2, 19 January 1825.

<sup>683</sup> See Rodway, *Guiana: British, Dutch, and French*, Chapter VI.

Some slaves valued material wealth even over freedom. Indeed the status of 'free' was possibly as significant for its capacity to facilitate the accumulation of wealth as it was for its value to an abstract notion of personal liberty. Rather than save up to buy manumission, some slaves preferred to use their money to buy property. Such was the case with the slave Friday, who belonged to William Forsyth:

I formerly belonged to Mr. Thomas Emery, now deceased, and was in the habit of hiring myself from said master Mr. Emery, and during that time I accumulated some money, with which I purchased, (through a Mr. Thomas Hill) a piece of land on lot No.4, and put up thereon a small house which, I cannot positively state, but think, cost me about 2000 guilders, and that the said house and land were subsequently taken away from me by my master Mr. Emery, without giving me any value for the same.<sup>684</sup>

The cost of manumission for a prime slave at this time was less than 2000 guilders for the average male slave,<sup>685</sup> so the purchase of a property of that value would have represented a considerably important decision for Friday. In this case Thomas Hill, a "coloured inhabitant", was called and confirmed the sale. A woman who was now Mr. Emery's wife, Mary Emery, who was then living in the house which Friday claimed to be his, also testified and stated that she had bought the property from her husband. The Fiscal afforded Mary Emery time to furnish proof that Mr. Emery was the legal owner when she bought it from him. She could not do so and so the Fiscal instigated legal process to recover the property for Friday.<sup>686</sup>

Disputes directly concerning money were the most idiosyncratic of all disputes. Apart from a single complaint action involving seven complainants, all such disputes were brought by an individual. Similarly, apart from that one action brought by

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<sup>684</sup> CB3, 14 November 1826.

<sup>685</sup> CB3, pp.191-192.

<sup>686</sup> CB3, 14 November 1826.

seven complainants, all the other complaints were lodged in 1826 or 1827. Perhaps this is not surprisingly – conditions on most plantations improved over time, decreasing the relevance of other concerns while at the same time affording slaves greater opportunities to accumulate money. The new slave codes specifically mentioned the rights of slaves to own, keep and enjoy their property, as noted by the Protector David Power in his letter to the Fiscal regarding the recommendation of prosecution of the case of Nancy Scott.<sup>687</sup> The 27<sup>th</sup> clause of the new slave codes provided official recognition of the slave's right to own property, but it also underlined the sociological importance of the idea that property rights were sanctified, and affirmed that the acquisition of material wealth was a legitimate and important function of modern society. Perhaps too the authorities were keen to dispel any hint of a double standard with regard to such rights, as much for the benefit of slave owners as for the slaves – after all it was an important lesson to be learned by those people most affected by the extreme application of property rights within the institution of slavery.

If property, material wealth, and style could enhance the standing of a slave, then the converse also held – that a stigma was attached to those slaves unable to maintain a minimum standard of acquisitions. Those slaves who were deemed lazy and lacking in property were looked down on by society in general.

I can produce witnesses who will depose the same upon oath as well as to the following that Quaces has been for years considered by the gang of (No. 5) to which he particularly belongs to, as a notoriously idle and abandoned character, possessed of not the smallest property on earth beyond his annual allowance [of] clothing, but keeps prowling about the estate at night or during his leisure hours an annoyance to the industrious and well disposed negroes who attend to rearing ground provisions and fowls. No careful negro will allow him to

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<sup>687</sup> CB3, Letter Power to Bennett, 2 January 1827, p.160.

spend a night in his house and he is known and distinguished from his rascality on the estate invariably by the name of Quaces s[on] of a w[hor]e.<sup>688</sup>

Significant in this testimony by the manager was a clear recognition that slaves routinely provided most of their own material wealth, as Quaces was criticized for only possessing “his annual allowance of clothing”. But equally significant is that this did not seem to worry Quaces. The manager may not have had much to do with the slaves’ private interests, nor indeed did he have to know much, but he knew that they set certain kudos on material possessions.

The position of materialist values in Berbice slave society cannot be any better illustrated than by the case of Hans on plantation Dentichem, which was fully described in Chapter Five. First there was the way this Obeah ceremony had been commercialised, with a fee charged by the maestro Hans to watch his magic. Hans had charged a fee for the people on the plantation for his services, as reported by Frederick in whose house the ceremony took place:

He told January that as he had come to put things right on the estate, every body, big and little, must contribute a bit [unit of money].<sup>689</sup>

Dentichem was a large plantation, which had (in 1826) some 276 slaves. It might be hard to believe that “all the men, women and children” were milling around January’s house. Yet the other testimonies confirm it, and if not all the slaves were involved, then the majority of them would surely have been. The man Hans was later found to have collected “f 50”, or 50 guilders, and there were four ‘bits’ to a guilder.<sup>690</sup> As each person (“big or little”) had to contribute a ‘bit’, then there must have been at least 200 people present. That notwithstanding, 50 guilders was a tidy

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<sup>688</sup> CB2, 9 April 1825.

<sup>689</sup> CB1, 17 June 1819.

<sup>690</sup> Rodway, *History of British Guiana*, p.152.



sum for an afternoon's work. More telling, however, would be the juxtaposition of material and spiritual values over the incident involving the wine glasses. In the middle of that dramatic and intense ceremony orchestrated by a powerful practitioner of Obeah, Hans had clumsily broken a wine glass. Even though most of the population of the plantation were watching this deeply spiritual ceremony, the proceedings were interrupted to discuss the loss of this property. The proprietor of the glass "got vexed" saying "this is the second glass you have broken".<sup>691</sup> Even during the intensity of the moment, the loss of property was capable of penetrating the veil of piety and fear which surrounded such ceremonies. Obeah or no Obeah, a wine glass was a wine glass after all.

Material aspirations and their associated values were not given the same priority by all slaves, no more than they are today. For some slaves just having enough to eat and drink in a comfortable house was enough, and the extra effort required to accumulate possessions or strike a particular pose was not considered worth the effort. These slaves would perhaps rather spend their free time relaxing than doing the extra work required for material prosperity.<sup>692</sup> Even so such slaves would still have been able to recognise the value that material accumulation had for the status of an individual in their society. The precise detail of the value system incorporated within slave society in Berbice in the 1820's, such as the particular way a man wore his hat or a woman slung her shawl, is entirely lost to observers of any later period. However we can know that such styles and values mattered within Berbice society, and that these values were independent from the values held by white society.

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<sup>691</sup> CB1, 17 June 1819.

<sup>692</sup> Catherina, Peggy, and Mary Ann, on plantation Profit, for example, were punished by the manager Thomas Hutchinson for "refusing to pot sugar for payment on Sunday morning" (PB1, Profit 18 June 1827).

Materialism incorporated many themes – prosperity, social standing, personal expression, family pride, care for the future, and many more. To what extent these values were influenced by similar values brought from Africa is hard to determine. What is clear, however, is that while Western society provided the basis of interaction and change, the interpretations and adaptations of Western material and social values were primarily the product of the slaves themselves.

## Chapter 9: Conclusion

You come from home<sup>693</sup>, I came to ask you, if you bring any newspaper from home, if any story there for manager to take my Jacket and Clothes to burn?<sup>694</sup>

When the slave Thomas sarcastically posed this question to the Fiscal in early March 1824 he was addressing a well understood system of British justice whereby published laws were seen to be above the interference of mere individuals, no matter how white or how powerful. Thomas was unlikely to have been able to read, but he understood that such proclamations were significant and powerful. Of course Thomas knew that no such item regarding his personal clothes would have been published, but it was a colourful way to illustrate the illegality of what his manager had done. Perhaps Thomas was also making some sly reference to the rebellion in Demerara which had taken place only the year before, and which had stemmed from a misinterpretation of parliamentary legislation and a perception among some of the slaves in that colony that the local officials had exceeded their legal authority.

Like Thomas, the slaves in Berbice demonstrated that they were ready, willing, and surprisingly able to utilize the British legal system to further their interests. Many slaves found reassurance in the stable, regulated, and formalised structure of the British judicial system. While it could often be unfair, it involved a sophisticated process governed by reason rather than passion, ordered by consistency rather than whim. These features were lacking in some African and most bush negro societies,

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<sup>693</sup> 'Home' meaning Britain.

<sup>694</sup> CB2, 4 March 1824.

and offered the inhabitants of Berbice the opportunity of theoretically impersonal intervention that did not rely on personal standing or popularity. It also provided a system of redress through which protest could be organised and formalized, where customary rights could be officially sanctioned and aberrant managers brought to task. We have seen that slaves routinely objected to managers who overstepped the mark.

Slaves in Berbice strove to understand and incorporate themselves and their own society into the broader context of the New World. Atlantic creoles in the emergent societies of the Chesapeake, according to Ira Berlin, were similarly attracted to Western regulated and formalised structures which “carried great weight with the black men and women who struggled for a place in Chesapeake society”.<sup>695</sup> Indeed it was not just their place in society which concerned these early slaves, but the possibility of isolation from it: “Atlantic creoles labored to incorporate themselves into the larger life of the Chesapeake in the hopes that participation would lead to recognition, and recognition would eliminate the threat of racial ostracism”.<sup>696</sup> Atlantic creoles of the seventeenth century may not have had fully formed notions of racism, but their concerns were relevant to the situation that the Berbice slaves found themselves in during the early nineteenth century. As discussed in Chapter Eight racism had by this time definitely found its way into British consciousness in the Caribbean.

Perhaps the greatest failing of the British in their social and official administration of Berbice was that they had demonstrably precluded those of African

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<sup>695</sup> Berlin, *Many thousands gone*, p.42.

<sup>696</sup> Ibid, p.45.

descent from a whole range of opportunities they had reserved for whites. Those of African descent who made the effort of assimilation into European society were no doubt disappointed to learn that their efforts had largely been in vain. As the creoles of Haiti were to discover, their acceptance into the European dominated world only extended so far. This failure, as much as anything, could explain the often contradictory and paradoxical interweaving of European and African traditions in Berbice. This uncertain and hesitant alliance of two cultural and social structures underscores the development of cultural and social practices in the colony. In the face of white racial rejection, slaves and free blacks increasingly internalised their social and cultural practices, and most no longer sought assimilation into a wider social context but rather chose to limit their association with the whites of Berbice to the impersonal exchanges required to live in the same geographical location.

Notwithstanding such racial exclusion, however, as long as life in the bush remained problematic and unpopular, then the most realistic strategy for slaves to improve their lives was to do so within the institution of slavery as it existed in Berbice. As shown in the section on 'going bush' in Chapter Six, the slaves in Berbice could have left their plantations at any time and permanently lived in the bush, free from the obligations of slaves. The vast majority of slaves, however, chose to remain within the colony.

Improving their lot within their own society required few references to outsiders, and so the opinions of those outsiders were often superfluous to a slave's identity and self worth. While some slaves tried to emulate and infiltrate white society, most only interacted with it. With the prospects of manumission low and the other alternatives

to slavery undesirable, bettering one's position and the position of one's family within the slave community became the priority for most slaves.

But the fact that slaves cooperated with slavery does not mean that they believed that slavery was right. Berbice slaves had exchanged economic co-operation for the ability to establish their own communities and kinship networks as described in Chapter Five. Ironically perhaps, the slaves' ability to establish cohesive and meaningful communities may have facilitated the slave system in the colony. When slaves formed close communal, familial and kinship structures they did so at the expense of a broader camaraderie linked by their shared oppression under slavery. Furthermore, the pre-eminence of such familial and communal structures forced slaves to become stakeholders in the colony. To abandon slavery by escape meant to risk the destruction of carefully constructed kinship and communal networks which were so important to their identity and social well being. It would be interesting to speculate to what extent slave holders were aware of the impact that these bonds had on reconciling the slaves to their work. Such bonds were likely to have been very much more effective than chains or whips in keeping slaves bound to their plantations.

Ultimately, the most important comparisons slaves could make were those between themselves as individuals, families or kin groups, and with other individuals, families and kin groups in their own social milieu. Slavery was not a uniform or consistent condition in Berbice, and it varied between workplaces, and between individuals. Just as the majority of punishments were accounted for by a minority of slaves and the majority of complaints were made by a small minority of

inhabitants,<sup>697</sup> the majority of discontent was likely to have been concentrated in a minority of the general population. Within slave society it is easy to imagine that some individuals felt relatively satisfied with their lot in life compared to that very visible minority of slaves for whom nothing seemed to go right. It is equally easy to understand that any change in the status quo could have threatened an individual's, or a family's, relatively good position within the black community and therefore provoke protest action. We saw in the case of Dido who "could not let ... pass" the fact that her "name had been made use of", a deeply felt concern for her respectability and her good name – a concern not focused on impressing the white elite, or even the general society of Berbice, but on establishing and fortifying her position within her own community.<sup>698</sup>

Slavery in Berbice was probably as harsh as it came in the Anglo-Caribbean. Michael Craton, reflecting on early reports by James Stephen in 1824, notes that while the Bahamas lay at the benign end of the scale of slave conditions, those colonies further south "particularly the newly acquired colonies of Trinidad and Guyana" lay at the other extreme.<sup>699</sup> Furthermore, the evidence from Demerara and Berbice indicates that within 'Guyana'<sup>700</sup> Berbice lay at the extreme end of that extremity.<sup>701</sup> Whatever the gradations of degradation, however, slavery in any place was never going to be acceptable to those designated as such. However, if the

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<sup>697</sup> About 5% of all adult slaves over 19 years old made an official complaint in the nine year period between 1819 and 1827 (PB1).

<sup>698</sup> Chapter Four, (CB3, 13 June 1827).

<sup>699</sup> Craton, *Empire, enslavement and freedom*, p.235.

<sup>700</sup> More properly at this time 'British Guiana'.

<sup>701</sup> A crude measure can be made by using the summarised punishment returns for Demerara and comparing these figures with the punishment record books of Berbice. Thus, the 19,322 slaves in Berbice shared some 6,936 punishments in the eight month period of November 1826 to July 1827, while the 60,599 slaves in Demerara shared some 8,649 punishments in the six month period of July to December 1829. Thus 45 punishments were inflicted per 1,000 slaves per month in Berbice against 24 punishments per 1,000 slaves per month in Demerara (PB1 and PD1).

conditions of slavery can produce psychological damage and aberrant social formations, then the slaves in Berbice were as likely to reveal these as any group of slaves in the New World. Yet they do not exhibit this damage. Most of the harsh conditions prevalent in Berbice were connected with productivity and the managers' need to maintain the profitable operation of the plantation enterprises. Recall from the tables in Chapter Two that some 77 percent of punishments were work related, with a further 14 percent being 'intermediate' offences with some relevance to work issues. This leaves less than 10 percent of offences concerned solely with social issues.

In Chapter One some brief mention was made of Orlando Patterson's definition of slavery. Patterson, according to Peter Kolchin, belongs to a group of scholars who see slavery as "preeminently a system of marginality rather than of labor exploitation".<sup>702</sup> But the marginalisation needs to be contextualised. Within black society in Berbice, the impact of white marginalisation only really affected the tiny number of blacks who sought assimilation with white society. In Berbice, labour exploitation remained the primary concern for the vast majority of the slaves. Ultimately, the existence of slaves (as well as their managers) in the colony was entirely dependent on their economic value to European investment. Labour exploitation not only defined the place of slaves in Berbice society, but also defined the slaves' principal objection to that place. Following emancipation the slaves' initial jubilation quickly turned sour once they learned that, under the apprenticeship system, they were still required to work on the plantations for several years. The

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<sup>702</sup> Peter Kolchin, "The big picture: a comment on David Brion Davis's "Looking at slavery from broader perspectives"", *American Historical Review*, v105(2), April 2000, p.469-470.



social status implied by the designation 'slave' proved to be less problematic to slaves than the obligations attached to that designation. Thus, being liberated from the designation was rather less important than being liberated from its obligations.

Perhaps unknown to the slaves of Berbice prior to emancipation was the fact that slavery was but one of many systems of labour exploitation that market capitalism had up its sleeve – a lesson they learned only too well after emancipation when they discovered that being free did not result in a cessation of their exploitation. Slavery and labour exploitation were in many ways synonymous for the slaves in Berbice and their eagerness to end their enslavement was intimately related to their eagerness to end that exploitation. What the figures for work related disputes demonstrate was that slaves, like all workers, struggled to ameliorate the conditions under which they had to labour. The alternatives for slaves were the bush or corporal punishment. The alternative for British workers was dismissal, loss of home and the workhouse. In both instances it could prove catastrophic for families and community.

Under these circumstances, the tolerance of slaves towards their exploitation and the conditions under which they were forced to live had well defined limits. Having attained a certain negotiated level of accommodation, Berbice slaves, as the slaves on *Herstelling* and *Noordsburg* demonstrated, commonly rejected changes in conditions and refused to cooperate with work conditions and practices they found oppressive. Such a situation is typified by the protest by 22 timber cutters working for L. F. Gallez. The slaves had various complaints to make, but principally they were protesting against recent changes in their accommodated position within slavery. Gallez was expanding his operations in Berbice at the time and was perhaps under

some financial stress, and this in turn had affected his relationship with his slaves – at least in the opinion of the plaintiffs:

We cannot find what has changed our master so much, previous to his purchase of the estates we were very well, but now we have no rest, we are not allowed to keep fowl, massa the overseer and driver shoots them. ... He will never leave us quiet about our wives, if they are pregnant he is vexed and finds fault upbraiding us that we are good for nothing than but to get women with child.<sup>703</sup>

The co-operation of the workers was threatened by the increased interference in their private lives, damage to their private property and their ability to participate in the informal economy. The slaves knew that they were “purchased to work”, but they also knew that the owner should “leave [them] quiet about [their] wives” and “allow [them] to keep fowl”. They emphasised to the Fiscal that they were only complaining about a change in their conditions: “if we were treated as in former times we would be satisfied”.<sup>704</sup>

For his part, Gallez exhibited all the characteristic panic of an entrepreneur who had briefly overextended himself – something the slaves were cognisant of: “if he has lost money or not by the estates we don’t know”, they told the Fiscal, but just raising the subject indicates that they possessed some intelligence about Gallez’s financial position. In his reply to the complaint Gallez introduced his own complaint of poor productivity and of workers deliberately sawing logs from trees they knew to have been unsuitable. He denied flogging, inadequate clothing allowances, or interference in their private economy, and particularly denied interference in their marital relations. In the course of the complaint both parties gave ground. Gallez stressed to the Fiscal how generous he was and how he would never consider

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<sup>703</sup> CB2, 21 September 1824.

<sup>704</sup> CB2, 21 September 1824.

behaving as the slaves had stated. If the slaves' testimony was correct then Gallez's denial amounts to an affirmation of the principles which underpinned the slaves complaint; but if Gallez was telling the truth then he was at least confirming the conditions of slavery under which the slaves themselves had stated they were willing to work. The complaint perhaps completed a process of negotiation which had already been under way, and the confrontation had formalised, both for the slaves and the owner, the conditions of slavery which satisfied both parties. The Fiscal noted that both the slaves and Gallez were happy with the agreed upon conditions which would operate within the enterprise and he dismissed the case.

Keeping slaves at their tasks was the primary goal of the slave system in Berbice. Physical coercion played some role, but it has been largely overrated as a system of control, and relative to the period was not as onerous as it can be made to seem by looking at dramatic but isolated examples of excessive corporal punishment. The dramatic representation of corporal punishment highlighted the extreme form of labour exploitation in slavery and thus made it an easy target of reformers. The redoubtable Dr. Ambedkar has made similar observations:

A deprivation of a man's freedom by an open and direct way is a preferable form of enslavement. It makes the slaves conscious of his enslavement and to become conscious of slavery is the first and most important step in the battle for freedom.<sup>705</sup>

Slavery was indeed a very obvious and open system of labour exploitation and represented an extreme and unambiguous example of the deprivation of freedom. The images generated by extreme examples of the physical punishment of slaves emphasised slavery's inhumanity and portrayed the enslavement of Africans in

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<sup>705</sup> Ambedkar, *Dr Ambedkar's thought*, p.100.

British colonies to the British public in its most dramatic form. Ideas of liberty and justice and free will were easily encapsulated by the images of slaves portrayed by abolitionists to the people of Britain and generated protest from millions. In Chapter Seven, however, we saw that the examples used in these images were rare, and no worse than corporal punishments inflicted on many British people of the day such as soldiers, sailors and convicts.

While the efforts of the abolitionists to emancipate the slaves in the New World were political justification for their representation of the untypical as typical, there is no justification for historians to perpetuate the image. Moreover, the physical coercion incorporated in the punishment regimes in Berbice was less catastrophic than the consequences of similar infractions by British workers in the Britain of the day. Insolence and disobedience in Berbice most often resulted in a night in the bedstocks, while such behaviour by a mill worker in Manchester would have led to dismissal and ruin. Stealing a cask of rum from the manager's house would have earned a male slave twenty-five lashes, while a British worker committing a similar offence in Britain would have been hanged or transported to Australia. Emilia Viottida Costa illustrates how abolitionists often overlooked the conditions of their own countrymen while campaigning for the liberation of slaves. She relates the example of an article in the *Christian Observer*, which not only exaggerated the horrors of slavery, but exaggerated the beneficence of the life of a British worker:

The article spoke of British workers and labourers – many of whom had risen in different parts of the country against poverty and oppression – as a privileged group of people, protected by the courts and by the laws. But it was silent about the arbitrariness they had suffered. And the persecution. And the gag laws. And the Home Office prohibition of workers' combinations and secret meetings.

And the harassments endured by radical leaders. And the many workers who had been arrested, tried, and sentenced to be transported or hanged.<sup>706</sup>

Ironically, while the plight of foreign workers deeply concerned the West in the early nineteenth century, it has failed to merit continuing denunciation in modern times. David Brion Davis has observed how the less obvious systems of exploitation have avoided the kind of assault the abolitionists were able to bring to bear on New World slavery, and has emphasised that ending slavery did not end slave-like labour exploitation:

In a sense, the multinational Atlantic Slave System can be seen as the first stepping stone toward the multinational corporations that today employ millions of virtual slaves in various construction and production projects in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.<sup>707</sup>

While it became increasingly difficult for English families of the early nineteenth century to tolerate the sweated labour of enslaved Africans in remote corners of the globe so that they could sweeten their tea, modern Western societies are still quite happy to allow “children in Indonesia and China [to work] in virtual slavery ‘so that children in America can put frilly dresses on America’s favourite doll’”, or kick soccer balls manufactured in Pakistan by “an estimated 10,000 children ... many ... sold as indentured slave labourers to their employers and branded like livestock”.<sup>708</sup>

We can be left in no doubt as to how slaves in Berbice viewed plantation work and labour exploitation in general – we only have to examine their behaviour following emancipation, when they rendered unworkable the compulsory indenture system and struck out on their own in an attempt to work solely for their own benefit. But their disquiet over the terms of engagement with the New World hegemony

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<sup>706</sup> Da Costa, *Crowns of Glory*, p.283.

<sup>707</sup> Davis, “Looking at slavery from broader perspectives”, p.466.

<sup>708</sup> Klein, *No logo*, p.328.

found a voice well before emancipation. In Chapter Two we saw how collective actions protesting against work conditions were pursued by slaves at the slightest deterioration in their conditions. And while slaves in Berbice could protest through the official auspices of the Fiscal's office, the nature and character of these struggles had few equals in Britain at this time, where a mass struggle was just another name for a riot, which was predictably dealt with by force of arms. Though collectives of British workers could petition parliament or set up benevolent societies to bring their grievances to the attention of the authorities, various legal impediments frustrated British workers in their pursuit of legal redress.<sup>709</sup>

The protests reviewed in this thesis have usually centred around non-customary practices or negative changes in work or social conditions. Beyond that, however, slavery required the co-operation of slaves to maintain the commercial viability of industrial plantation agriculture in the colony. Within slavery, there were no corporeal blank cheques that slaves had to sign over to slave owners. You could capture and punish other human beings, and physically confine them, but you could not make them work. An experienced manager such as Robert McDermott working on plantation Eliza And Mary could be helplessly stumped when one of his “strongest” slaves, Koopman, simply refused to work, for which, according to McDermott, “he had not any other cause to assign but that ‘he would not’”. McDermott made several entreaties and offered to allow him to work another day instead, all to no avail.<sup>710</sup> McDermott had similar problems with Amsterdam who

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<sup>709</sup> For example the Combination Acts of 1799 and 1800. Though they were repealed in 1824, new laws such as the master and servant laws and common-law conspiracy laws effectively thwarted the efforts of workers to express their grievances. See Thomson, *The making of the English working class*.

<sup>710</sup> PB1, Eliza and Mary 8 January 1827.

refused to cut wood in the bush: "I said if he did not go I should put him in the stocks & flog him the next morning, he replied he would go in the stocks".<sup>711</sup>

However most slaves did not refuse to work, and most preferred slavery to the alternative of escape and life as a bush negro. Because they stayed, they had to make their lives tolerable by cooperating with the slave system. Had the system of slavery been as bad as has often been presented, causing the slaves to be unable to form meaningful social and familial structures or working them to the extent that they had no life outside their work, then they would have had little to lose by escaping to the bush or even rising in open rebellion. But slaves did have something to lose, and the fear of that loss kept them within slavery. Cooperation was always conditional and the owners and managers depended on it. Indeed, despite the similarities between slavery and Nazi concentration camps discerned by Primo Levi and others,<sup>712</sup> this element of cooperation marks a fundamental difference. As Robert Fogel points out, while the "Nazis did not need the cooperation of the inmates of concentration camps to exterminate them", plantation owners needed "at least the passive cooperation of slaves to make their plantations profitable".<sup>713</sup>

Some might see the failure of slaves to act more collectively to pursue their best interests as a failure of rationality. But as discussed in Chapter Two in the section on collective actions by slaves, the number of those involved in collective actions was probably optimised by slaves in a rational way to maximise the impact of a complaint while at the same time minimizing the community's exposure to punishment. Though it might be assumed that slave owners had the right to set their

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<sup>711</sup> PB1, Eliza and Mary 20 February 1827.

<sup>712</sup> Primo Levi, *Surviving Auschwitz*, New York 1996.

<sup>713</sup> Fogel, *Without consent or contract*, pp.188-189.

own standards on their own property for their own slaves, this was not the practice in Berbice for a wide range of conditions which were governed by negotiated customary practices. This relativity of estate conditions transcended the whims of individual owners and managers and was recognised by the Fiscal who, when confronted with complaints that an estate did not conform to some general practice, took great pains to determine the 'standard' practised on most estates and then to determine whether the disputed regime on the offending estate met those standards. Even without official recognition, slaves were keenly aware of the status quo and would take legal or informal action to ensure that their workplace conformed to customary standards. For example a deputation of slaves from Nieuw Vigilantie protested by refusing to work when they learned they were not to get an informal holiday common to other plantation workers.

We do not do this [work] as the day was given to other negroes on other estates, this is not the first time. We never got Blauw Monday (that is to say the day of rest after the holidays) and we are always ridiculed and laughed at by the gangs on other properties.<sup>714</sup>

The work they were expected to do by the manager Mr. H. C. Mittelholzer was "light" but it was the principle that mattered to these slaves. They were concerned for their community reputation among other communities of slaves in the area. By openly ridiculing the slaves on Nieuw Vigilantie, the slaves on other estates were reminding them of two things. First, how much better they were at being able to win attractive concessions from their managers. And second, that the Nieuw Vigilante slaves were letting a manager breach established conditions in a way which could set a precedent and therefore threaten all plantation workers. Mittelholzer claimed his

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<sup>714</sup> CB2, 3 January 1825.



actions were designed to prevent the slaves from “excess in drinking” which having too many days off would allow, rather than “on account of the work”. But this was precisely the problem for the slaves. They did not accept that the institution of slavery permitted such an extension of their manager’s authority into their private affairs. The slave’s ‘slave’ was an adult, independent individual and Mittelholzer’s ‘slave’ was a helpless child needing careful management and protection.<sup>715</sup>

As the figures and findings of this thesis hopefully reveal, open defiance of slavery was rare, but protesting against particular conditions which owners and managers sought to impose was common. The majority of slaves concentrated on their day to day existence within their communities and within their obligations to their owners. For the most part those who were designated as slaves treated slavery as an occupation for which they had no available attractive alternative. The study of the people of Berbice cannot be characterised by the unusual, the eccentric or the bizarre, but must be understood by the usual, the normal and the commonplace.

Sidney Mintz, a long time scholar of plantation life has summed it up very well:

Whatever we make of this earlier period in the study of slave life, it nonetheless is a fact that during the nearly four centuries that slavery flourished in this hemisphere, only a tiny fraction of daily life consisted of open resistance. Instead, most of life then, like most of life now, was spent living; and most of it was lived in daily, even perfunctory, association with the holders of power. Hence to limit oneself to the study of violent resistance is to avert one’s eyes from most of African-American history.<sup>716</sup>

Examining slavery by studying its excesses sidesteps the behaviour of the vast majority of the slave population. Furthermore, by studying slavery in isolation many historians fail to contextualise the institution, with the danger that features described

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<sup>715</sup> CB2, 3 January 1825.

<sup>716</sup> Mintz, “Slave Life”, p.13.

within the study are presented in a way which suggests that those features were peculiar to slavery. The consequence is that slavery is made to seem much worse for the period than it was, and this in turn makes it difficult to explain the fact of slave cooperation. If slaves had cooperated with an excessively onerous system of subjection it makes them look either generally dishonoured, psychologically impaired or, worse still, irrational. If slavery is presented in a realistic light, contextualised with general conditions of the period, it does not excuse the institution but rather highlights features of repression common to the day. The slaves in Berbice behaved rationally and made the best of the arduous conditions under which they had to labour. While some individuals succumbed to pathological debilitation, either mentally or physically, there is no evidence to suggest that this was more common among the slaves in Berbice than among any population of free persons of the period. The cases of suicide reviewed in Chapter Six illustrate the point that explaining such desperate behaviour by reference to slavery is rarely valid.

This thesis has attempted to provide a useful and detailed snapshot of life in a slave colony in the early nineteenth century New World. In many ways Berbice was unique, and consequently many features of the system of slavery which developed there were also unique. The existence of the Fiscal's office, for example, and the access to legal redress it afforded the slaves in the colony, clearly mark the colony out as unusual in the New World. It would be invalid to generalise about slavery from one small slave society in South America. But given that Berbice was at least as physically harsh as any slave colony in the region, this study raises questions about some conclusions made by historians of other parts of the Anglo-American slave world. Historians of other slave societies may find it useful to consider

whether the situation of slaves in Berbice might have been found to apply in other regions had there been records for those places similar to those generated by the Fiscal's office in Berbice.

Berbice inevitably shared at least some characteristics with other slave colonies and is thus capable of increasing our understanding about a wide variety of circumstances which affected the slave experience. Moreover, it can add to our knowledge of labour exploitation, cultural formation, and social development in slave societies. The interactions between African and European socio-economic traditions was complex and often paradoxical. What this study has striven to achieve is to understand the trends and tendencies of slave actions and behaviour in Berbice. In particular I hope to have explained why slaves remained slaves in Berbice and preferred a negotiated accommodation with management rather than to an escape from their exploitation. Despite slavery, the slaves of Berbice were able to retain their dignity and honour and did not rely on white opinion for their self worth. Despite slavery they were able to establish strong familial and communal structures independent of their managers and owners – structures which were minimally affected by any lack of official recognition. Despite slavery they were able to construct their own value systems and social priorities. The slaves of Berbice neither completely rejected European values nor completely abandoned African ones, but rather drew from both to form their own unique place in the New World.

The secret lives of the silent majority have often been overlooked, not so much by design as by the circumstances of historical evidence. While the Fiscal's documents enable us to make some statistical generalizations about the social and cultural history of a New World society in the early nineteenth century, perhaps their

greatest value lies in their ability to add flesh to the bones of a large number of ordinary people who made that history. The documents add colour and texture to slaves who have until now been trapped within the one line entries on slave registration lists. Through the testimonies these entries are transformed from imposed names and physical descriptions into complex characters capable of transcending the leaden label 'slave'. The Fiscal's documents contain many secret lives of slaves and thus provide the opportunity to generate biographies of many ordinary people, granting them what Lorena Walsh has termed their "place in time".<sup>717</sup>

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<sup>717</sup> Lorena S. Walsh, "A "Place in Time" regained: a fuller history of colonial Chesapeake slavery through group biography", in Larry E. Hudson Jr., (ed.), *Working towards freedom: slave society and domestic economy in the American South*, New York 1994, p.1.

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